Crampton - Reworked

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CRAMPTON

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FADE IN:

EXT. INNER CITY DETROIT - NIGHT

It is after midnight in one of the most run-down areas of Detroit--all long-abandoned buildings, many gutted by fires.

EXT. OUTSIDE WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

In the street outside an old warehouse, about two dozen cops in bulletproof vests are assembled. They are antsy, ready for action. Among them is--

BRADY WELLS, a cocksure twenty-five-year-old cop.

BRADY
(whispering to his PARTNER)
What the hell are we waiting for? This vest is cutting off my circulation.

BRADY'S PARTNER
You volunteered us for this.

Slightly removed from this group are RICKY SMITH and LARRY JOHNSON, two weary-looking men in their

early 40s. Ricky is large-bodied and bearded; Larry is slim and clean-shaven. Their bulletproof vests have "FBI" on them in big yellow letters.

RICKY
(to LARRY)
Are you ready or what?

LARRY
All right. But this is it, do you hear me? After tonight I'm done with this fucking case.

One of the cops steps over to the FBI agents.

LEAD COP
We're ready to move.

RICKY
Let's do it.

The cop turns back to his men.

LEAD COP
We're going in. I want three of you in front with the ram. The rest of you in teams of two, three teams per floor. Remember, don't shoot unless there's a gun pointed at you. And keep your radios on and your mikes open--I want uninterrupted radio contact.

The cops break up into units. One takes a heavy ram out of the back of a van and heads to the warehouse entrance.

EXT. WAREHOUSE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

An old wooden door, deadbolted and padlocked. The cops get in position--two holding the ram, a third directly behind, gun at the ready. Larry and Ricky are right there, ready to jump in as soon as the door is open. The rest of the cops are lined up behind.

LEAD COP
(whispering)
Okay, let's do this neat and clean, just like on t.v. On three. One ... two ...

The cops holding the ram swing it back.

LEAD COP
... three!

The ram swings forward, SLAMMING into the door just below the deadbolt. With a CRUNCH the ram GOES THROUGH THE DOOR, punching a hole in the old wood, spraying dust and splinters into the air.

LARRY
Shit!

LEAD COP
Hit it again!

The cops work the ram out of the hole and swing it again. It CRUNCHES into the rotten wood, splitting a long crack down the middle of the door. The lock still holds.

RICKY

Goddamn it. The hinges! Hit the hinges!

The cops aim the ram at the bottom hinge and swing. With a SQUEAL the screws that hold the hinge to the doorframe let go. The ram swings at the top hinge. The hinge POPS out of the frame. The door hangs cockeyed, held up only by the two locks. Ricky steps up and KICKS THE DOOR AJAR.

LEAD COP
Go! Go! Go!

Ricky and Larry rush into the building, the cops streaming in behind. Brady is among them.

BRADY
So much for neat and clean.

INT. WAREHOUSE

The cops move in silently, guns and flashlights extended. The flashlight beams reveal complete disarray--racks of clothing are everywhere, some tipped over, clothes in a pile on the floor. Boxes are stacked against the walls, many tipped over as well, spilling out clothes hangers. They pair off and head in different directions. Some go up a set of rickety stairs.

RICKY
(to LARRY)
You stay down here. I'll check upstairs.

LARRY

Ricky--this doesn't look right
at all.

RICKY
I know ... which means it
probably is.

They split up.

INT. CORRIDOR IN WAREHOUSE

A PAIR OF FLASHLIGHT BEAMS shine up from a stairway, dust swirling in the light. Brady and his partner enter the corridor.

BRADY
(into microphone)
We're on the third floor.
Still no sign of anything.

LEAD COP (ON RADIO)
Keep your eyes open.

INT. FIRST FLOOR

Larry and two cops stand in front of a door. Larry tests the knob--unlocked. He looks at the cops, his eyes saying "get ready." In one quick movement he turns the knob and enters the room gun-first, the cops right behind him. Three flashlights sweep the room--a maze of empty shelves.

FIRST COP
Holy shit!

Larry and the SECOND COP turn toward where the first cop's flashlight is aimed. Captured in the

circle of light is a woman's headless body.

SECOND COP
Her head! Where the fuck is her head?!

INT. FOURTH FLOOR

Ricky and two cops are searching the fourth floor. They stop dead when they hear--

SECOND COP (ON RADIO)
... Where the fuck is her head?!

RICKY
(into mic)
Larry, what's going on?

INT. FIRST FLOOR

Larry approaches the decapitated torso cautiously. He runs his flashlight down the body toward the floor. Where the woman's feet should be is a metal stand.

LARRY
It's not a body. It's just a dresser's dummy.

INT. THIRD FLOOR

Brady and his partner listening to the radio.

LARRY (ON RADIO)
Repeat: it's just a dummy.

BRADY

(to PARTNER)
This is a total cluster fuck.

LEAD COP (ON RADIO)
Wells, your mike is open,
remember?

BRADY
Shit!

INT. FOURTH FLOOR

Ricky and the two cops.

RICKY
(into microphone)
Keep looking.

Ricky shines his flashlight down the hallway. At the far end is--

A DOOR, HALF OPEN

Ricky walks slowly toward it.

The two cops don't see Ricky break away. They enter a large room. The floor CREAKS OMINOUSLY under their feet.

THIRD COP
This place is going to fall
down on our goddamn heads.

INT. THIRD FLOOR

Brady and his partner enter a room. Their flashlights crawl over shelves laden with mannequin parts--arms, legs, torsos, hands in

various poses. The top shelves are all heads, with and without wigs. Brady and his partner are obviously creeped out.

BRADY'S PARTNER
Brady?

BRADY
I know. Just keep your focus--
we're looking for real people.
Nobody ever got killed by a
mannequin.

An OMINOUS CREAKING comes from the celling above their heads.

INT. FOURTH FLOOR - OLD OFFICE

Ricky pushes the door fully open and enters a long room. Along the walls are rows of small desks with switchboards. At the far end is a large desk. A HEAVY BLACK ROTARY-STYLE PHONE sits on the desk.

Ricky looks nervous but excited.

RICKY
(INTO MICROPHONE)
Larry, I think I found it. The
desk, the phone ... it's right
here.

INT. FIRST FLOOR

Ricky's voice is all SQUELCH AND STATIC in Larry's earphone.

LARRY

Ricky? Say again, I didn't get
that. (Beat) Ricky?

INT. FOURTH FLOOR

Ricky scans the room with his flashlight. The beam stops on the back wall where heavy floor-to-ceiling--

CURTAINS

--hang, completely concealing the wall. They are torn, tattered and ugly. A roaring sound, like an approaching tornado, begins to rise from behind it.

INT. FOURTH FLOOR - CREAKING FLOOR ROOM

The floor lets out a MOAN. The two cops have a second to look at each other before--

INT. THIRD FLOOR - MANNEQUIN PARTS ROOM

The ceiling GIVES WAY. One cop drops through the rotten wood, hitting the shelves of mannequin parts. Plaster arms, legs, and heads tumble to the floor. Brady falls backwards, throwing his arms over his head to protect himself.

BRADY
Jesus fuck!

The cop hits the ground with a loud OOF! Shelves and body parts topple onto him.

Brady looks up, flashlight out. The air is choked with dust. At his feet, a fallen MANNEQUIN HEAD is

still spinning. For a second, Brady seems hypnotized by it.

LEAD COP (ON RADIO)
What's that? Is everyone okay?

BRADY
(to the cop that dropped through the ceiling)
You okay, man?

THIRD COP
(groaning)
Yeah, I think so.

A PIERCING SCREAM bursts out of the radio, making Brady WINCE.

INT. FIRST FLOOR

Larry whips the SCREAMING earphone out of his ear.

LARRY
Christ, that sounds like Ricky.
(to the two cops)
Upstairs! Let's go!

INT. FOURTH FLOOR - HALLWAY

A half-dozen cops run down the corridor toward the open office door. The SCREAMS are still coming from that room.

LEAD COP (ON RADIO)
... somewhere on the fourth floor. Repeat: FBI Agent Smith

possibly down, somewhere on
the fourth floor.

INT. FOURTH FLOOR - OFFICE

The cops enter the office. The switchboards and the large desk are gone--nothing but faint outlines in the dusty floor. Ricky, still SCREAMING, is lying on his back near the far wall.

The cops surround him and shine their flashlights on his face--eyes wide, mouth an "O." His fist is clamped around one of the long curtains, now pulled partway off its hooks.

Ricky's SCREAM wavers and dies.

LARRY (O.S.)
Set away from him!

The cops turn around. Larry is in the office doorway.

LARRY
Give him some room, goddamn
it!

The circle of cops breaks up, Larry pushing them aside as he approaches. He kneels next to his partner.

LARRY
(softly, to RICKY)
Jesus, Ricky. I hope it was
worth it.

The cops are starting to gather around Ricky again.

LARRY
(to the COPS)
Is someone going to call an ambulance? Come on, move it!

They move it. Larry shines his flashlight toward the curtain, part of which is still clutched in Ricky's frozen hand. Behind the tattered fabric is nothing but BARE BRICK WALL.

FIVE YEARS LATER

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - OFFICES - 8:55 A.M.

A room full of desks separated by cubicles. FBI agents are just arriving and settling in. One of them is--

LARRY JOHNSON

He's a few years older, a few years fatter. He hangs his jacket on the back of his chair. Another agent catches his eye.

FBI AGENT
Hey, Larry. You watch the Caps game last night?

LARRY
Shut up, I taped it.

FBI AGENT
Do yourself a favor--skip the third period.

LARRY
Didn't I already tell you to shut up?

FBI AGENT
I'm just saying, unless you've got a thing for lucky goals--

Larry's response is a slow-burn stare. The other agent finds something else to do.

Larry drops a brown paper lunch sack on his desk. It lands next to a MANILA ENVELOPE, which Larry notices for the first time. "CAREFUL - PHOTOS" is stamped across the envelope in red ink.

Larry picks up the envelope and sits down.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - LOBBY

A few stragglers are rushing to get to their desks by nine. To enter, they have to show an FBI ID badge to a SECURITY GUARD and pass through an electric arch.

Into the lobby rushes--

BRADY

--wearing sunglasses and a wrinkled suit. Tossing a perfunctory "Excuse me" over his shoulder, he cuts in front of a few people and tries to blow past the guard.

BRADY
Hey, Russell.

SECURITY GUARD
Where's your badge, Brady?

BRADY
(searching his pockets)
Right, right. All personnel must display proper ID at all times.

SECURITY GUARD
It's not me, my man. It's the eye in the sky.

The guard indicates the three cameras in the corners, all aimed at them.

VIDEO MONITOR - On a black-and-white screen, we see the guard pointing up into the camera.

LOBBY

Brady comes up with a little plastic badge. He waves this in the guard's direction.

BRADY
Bingo. One badge.

Brady clips the badge to his jacket. The guard lets him pass.

INT. ELEVATOR

The doors are closing. Brady, running, just gets his hand in before it's too late. The doors slide open and he gets into the car, panting to catch his breath. It takes a second to register that with him in the elevator is--

HELEN SWEETEN, a pretty woman in her early 30s.

She's dressed in a suit that flatters her figure. She's got one of those stick-on nametags neatly affixed to the breast pocket of her jacket.

Brady tries to sneak a peek at her nametag without being too obvious about it. He tilts his head this way, then that way.

None of this is lost on Helen. At first she looks slightly irritated, then flat-out annoyed. Finally--

HELEN
Would it help if I took my blouse off? Or would you prefer I get it wet?

BRADY
(removing sunglasses)
I was Just trying to read your nametag, Miss ... Sweeten.

HELEN
Agent Sweeten.

BRADY
Sorry, Agent Sweeten. First day?

HELEN
Transfer.

BRADY
(holding out his hand)
I'm Brady Wells.

Agent Brady Wells.

HELEN
(taking his hand)
Agent Wells.

She shakes his hand in a way that says she considers the conversation over.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - LOBBY

A MAN enters the lobby. At first we see only his shoes--shiny and black, like the kind that come with a rented tuxedo.

He walks toward the security guard, who is concentrating on the newspaper crossword.

VIDEO MONITOR - The man steps into the camera's view. Prom this HIGH ANGLE we can't see his face, only slicked-back hair and his clothes: a black suit, stiff white cuffs, white gloves--classic stage magician attire. He's only on screen for a second when THE PICTURE GOES ALL SCREWY, filling with snow and ghost images.

LOBBY

The man passes through the electronic arch and into the heart of FBI headquarters. The guard never even looks up.

INT. ELEVATOR

Brady and Helen, just standing there, watching the floor number change.

BRADY
So ... what's your favorite movie?

HELEN
I beg your pardon?

BRADY
Mine's Titanic. I've got it on DVD. Dolby sound system. It's almost like--

HELEN
Does this really work?

BRADY
What's that?

HELEN
This thing where you try to pick up women by talking about Titanic. Like you're going to seem all sensitive or something.

BRADY
I'm just making conversation.

HELEN
(a long pause; then)
For the record, I've never seen Titanic. But you know what? I'll bet the boat sinks, doesn't it?

BRADY
Yes.

HELEN
There, see? I already know how it ends.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - OFFICES

The man in the black suit walks the halls with a deliberate but unhurried pace. Though he walks without pretense of stealth, his passage seems completely undetected: the FBI agents that mill about don't bother to look up as he goes by, or their attention is drawn elsewhere just as he comes into view. Those in his path step out of his way without even knowing it.

The man enters a door marked "Criminal Division" that leads to a room full of desks. Sitting at one is Larry Johnson. He is studying a sheaf of what appear to be enlarged photographs. He looks vaguely troubled.

The man strides to Larry's desk. He reaches into his Jacket.

MAN IN BLACK SUIT
(in a dead voice)
Larry Johnson?

LARRY
(looking up)
Yes?

Johnson's face goes ashen.

LARRY
How did you get in here?

LARRY'S POV - we get a vary brief glimpse of the man's face--handsome but bland, forgettable--before it is blocked by the barrel of a .44. The .44 EXPLODES--BANG!

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - HALLWAY.

Elevator doors slide open. Just as Brady and Helen step out, they hear the .44 FIRING TWO MORE SHOTS. Lightning-fast, Brady's gun is in his hand. He moves toward the door.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - OFFICES

The man in the black suit fires THREE FINAL BULLETS into Larry's body. Larry is SLAMMED BACKWARDS out of his chair.

The ROAR of gunfire breaks the spell--all the FBI agents in the room turn toward the assassin. One leaps at the man, catching him in a flying tackle.

They hit the ground with an alarming CLATTER. The man in the black suit seems to fall apart--arms, legs and head all breaking off.

The door to the office opens and Brady rushes in, entering a scene of utter chaos. What previously was a man dressed in stage magician's clothes is now a broken-up plaster mannequin. The head is STILL SPINNING at Brady's feet.

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - BRIEFING ROOM - LATER THAT DAY

Several dozen FBI agents sit waiting for something to happen. There is a low-level buzz of conversation, but the mood is pretty grim. Brady is sitting near the front.

The door BANGS open and the SECTION CHIEF stalks in. He's carrying a black plastic crate marked "EVIDENCE." He looks pissed. The conversation level drops to zero.

SECTION CHIEF
(addressing the room)
I just spent the last half hour getting my ass chewed out by the deputy director, who spent the previous hour getting his ass chewed out by the director. This is one fucked-up situation, people. Someone enters the most secure non-military building in the country, carries a gun through a metal detector without a beep, walks past almost a hundred armed FBI agents, puts six bullets into a man, then vanishes. And we don't have the first clue how he did it. All we have is this...

He takes the mannequin head out of the crate and places it on the table.

SECTION CHIEF
Does anybody know what this is?

FBI AGENT #1
It's a head.

SECTION CHIEF
Wrong. It is somebody's way of saying "fuck you" to the FBI. Until we have that person in custody, this is the only case on your desks. The director wants 100 percent commitment on this one. Everything else can wait.

A few grumbles from the agents.

SECTION CHIEF
Shut up. Here's where we stand so far. The security tapes are useless--looks like somebody tampered with the cameras so they'd malfunction, start picking up television signals--so we've got no idea what the guy looks like. Ballistics has the gun, and forensics has the rest of this...

He taps the mannequin head.

SECTION CHIEF
We should hear something back from them within the hour. In the meantime, I want you to work in teams of two. Until we have a better idea what we're dealing with, we're going to

look at this thing from every possible angle. Your individual supervisors will give you your orders. Remember--there are no shit jobs. Anything might get us a lead. Any questions?

No hands go up.

SECTION CHIEF
Good. One last thing. The media is already halfway up our ass. In about an hour the director will issue a statement. During the course of this statement he will say that the Bureau has not ruled out the possibility that Agent Johnson's murder was a terrorist act.

BRADY
(to himself; skeptically)
Sure, why not.

SECTION CHIEF
Does anyone here have a better explanation for what happened this morning?

The agents remain silent.

SECTION CHIEF
Right. Now, get back to your divisions.

The agents start getting up and talking loudly to each other. Brady gets out of his chair.

SECTION CHIEF
Agent Wells, can I see you for a second?

BRADY
What's up, Chief?

SECTION CHIEF
You seen anything like this before?

BRADY
No. The fraud cases I usually handle, they're all about profit. This seems more like a revenge deal. There's no profit in revenge.

SECTION CHIEF
How about the disappearing act? You deal with people who know about that kind of thing, right?

BRADY
Yeah, I was thinking about that, too. But those guys ... when they're gone, they're gone--zap. No little mementos.

SECTION CHIEF
Follow up on it anyway. I already talked to your

supervisor. You'll report back
to me directly.

BRADY
No problem.

Brady turns to go.

SECTION CHIEF
Hang on. Teams of two,
remember?

BRADY
What?

SECTION CHIEF points to a chair in the third row, where Helen is sitting.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - HALLWAY

Brady walking down the hall, fuming. Helen is a step behind, matching his pace.

HELEN
Is this going to be a problem
for you?

BRADY
No.

HELEN
Then what's your damage?

BRADY
(stopping short)
My "damage?" My "damage" is
that I've been slaving away

working bunco jobs for five years, and this is what it gets me--a rinky-dink assignment with a newbie partner.

HELEN
Gee, Agent Titanic, sorry the murder of another FBI agent didn't help your career more.
(she starts walking again, leaving Brady behind)
Asshole.

She exits through a door marked "GARAGE". Brady follows.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - PARKING GARAGE

Helen steps up to a CLERK's window.

HELEN
Sweeten, badge number 3293-2211. Need a car.

CLERK
Hang on.

Brady comes through the door.

BRADY
Who the hell are you, anyway?

HELEN
What does that mean?

BRADY

It means do you know what you're doing, or do I have to worry that you're going to get your gun caught on your purse and accidentally shoot me.

HELEN
It won't be accidentally.

The clerk passes Helen a set of keys.

CLERK
B-64.

HELEN
Thank you.

She walks up the ramp. Again, Brady follows.

HELEN
Look, Agent ... what's your name again?

BRADY
Brady Wells.

HELEN
... Agent Wells, I put up with this FBI boys club bullshit for seven years down in Florida, and I'll tell you, southerners are a lot better at it than you. So do us both a favor and drop it.

They reach a parking spot marked "B-64," where a nondescript sedan is parked. She tosses him the

keys.

HELEN
Here. Make yourself useful.

He snatches them out of the air.

CUT TO:

EXT. WASHINGTON D.C. - DAY

The FBI car cruises through downtown Washington.

INT. CAR - DAY

Brady driving, Helen in the passenger's seat, uncomfortable silence between them. Brady's chewing his bottom lip, trying to decide whether or not to try to be friendly to this woman. Finally...

BRADY
So, Florida, huh?

HELEN
Yes.

BRADY
Whereabouts?

HELEN
Tampa.

BRADY
Oh, yeah. Lot of gangs around there. The average age is, what, around seventy-eight? Why do they need a Bureau

shop? A rash of denture thefts?

HELEN
Every year, American senior citizens are defrauded of over fifty million dollars. Insurance cons. Phantom stocks. Counterfeit lottery tickets. The St. Petersburg area offers a high concentration of financially secure men and women trying to enjoy their golden years. Awfully tempting for scam runners.

BRADY
Well, Agent Sweeten, welcome to our nation's capital. We've got your kidnapping, your extortion, your crooked congressmen, your international spies, your violent whackos both foreign and domestic, real terrorism, and let's not forget the most powerful man in the world driving around town like a big-ass bullseye. So, if we see any little old ladies getting rolled for their bingo money, I'll let you take point. Otherwise, Just follow my lead.

HELEN
Are you always such a prick?

BRADY
Pretty much.

EXT. JOEY'S GAME ROOM - DAY

The FBI sedan stops in front of a divey bar on a divey street.

INT. CAR

Brady puts it in "park."

BRADY
Here's the deal. This bar ... it's a regular hangout for cons. Long con specialists. I'm talking guys who will string a mark along for years before they move, then bleed him dry and be gone before anyone knows it happened. Real stonefaced motherfuckers.

HELEN
What, you don't do anything about this?

BRADY
This isn't one of your lottery swindles, Sweeten. These guys are like fucking groundhogs-- they stick their heads out maybe once, and if they see a shadow they vanish. There was

this investigation a few years ago--I managed to pick up a couple of them, but the bastards covered their trail so deep we couldn't make it stick. I kind of got to know them during the case. They're really not that bad ... you know, for thieves. I occasionally come to them for advice in situations like these.

HELEN
So they're snitches?

BRADY
Yes.

HELEN
Why don't you Just come out and say that? Jesus...

BRADY
The point is, despite our relationship, the guys in here can he a little jumpy, so just ... play it cool.

INT. JOEY'S GAME ROOM

The place is small but clean--a bar, a row of booths, a pool table, and a door that leads to a back room. At the bar, a DARK-HAIRED MAN is talking to a BLOND WOMAN.

Brady leads Helen inside, making a beeline for the booths. The only other people in the place are sitting at one of the booths; the SNITCHES--one very tall with a ponytail, the other rather short--and two of their CON-MAN BUDDIES.

BIG SNITCH
(laughing, to CON BUDDIES)
... and the guy says--this is the best part--the guy says, "Can I give you a ride to the airport?" And I say, "Yeah, but can we swing by the bank first?"
(the CON BUDDIES laugh)
... So, he's waiting outside while I empty out his bank account. And he gets a parking ticket! (now they're laughing so hard they're crying) All the rest of the ride, he's telling me about how bad his day is, and I'm thinking, "Buddy, you don't even know."

Brady and Helen stand next to the booth. The big snitch stops laughing.

BIG SNITCH
Shh. It's the Ed-fays.

The other con artists clam up fast and excuse themselves. Brady slides into the booth next to the little snitch.

BRADY

Good morning, gentlemen.

BIG SNITCH
Blow me, g-man.
(to LITTLE SNITCH)
You--don't say anything.

The little snitch makes a zipping motion across his lips.

HELEN
You're pretty snippy for a snitch.

The snitches notice her for the first time.

BIG SNITCH
We prefer the epithet "paid informant" ... accent on "paid."
(to BRADY)
Who is this person? It's not bad enough you make this unannounced appearance on our home turf, you've gotta bring a stranger with you?

BRADY
We're investigating a case that touches upon your area of expertise.

BIG SNITCH
Oh yeah? Whoever got dipped deserved it. Fool and his money and all that.

BRADY
Not a con--a murder.

BIG SNITCH
Hey... this is that thing that happened at FBI headquarters this morning, isn't it?

HELEN
How did you hear about that? There hasn't been an official press release yet.

The little snitch is about to reply, hut the big snitch puts his hand up to stop him.

BIG SNITCH
Hey! Dummy up!
(to HELEN)
Well, lady, When you belong to the social circle that we do, you find that information can be a valuable asset. Setting that information in advance of your competition is the name of the game. Even a matter of a few hours can make the difference between first place and second place. And in this business, there is no prize for second place.

Brady takes a second to process this line of bullshit.

BRADY
You got it off the Internet.

BIG SNITCH
The point is that we already got the skinny on this. Some kind of terrorist thing. Not exactly our area of expertise.

BRADY
This particular shooter, terrorist, whatever ... he pulled a fancy disappearing act on us.

The snitches are suddenly very interested.

BIG SNITCH
Ahhh. Now this little visit is beginning to make sense. So, how did he do it? Was there an obvious escape route? You know, trapdoor, ceiling tile, what have you? Did he use flash powder? Smoke bomb?

Helen gives Brady a "what the fuck?" look.

BRADY
(to HELEN)
Before they turned to the dark side, our friends here were pretty decent magicians.
(to SNITCHES)
You ought to think about going back to your legitimate profession.

BIG SNITCH

Are you kidding? So back to playing cups-and-balls for a bunch of gape-mouthed tourists? Fuck that. There's no pride in that gig--and more importantly, no money.

BRADY
What about David Copperfield? That guy's loaded.

BIG SNITCH
(getting pissed)
You always bring up David Copperfield, like you've got some kind of a hard-on for the guy. He's a hack! We were ten times the magicians that guy is! Here ...

The snitches grab a salt shaker, a pepper shaker, and a bottle of ketchup and arrange them on the table.

BIG SNITCH
... want to know how he made the Statue of Liberty disappear? Say you're the salt, the camera is the pepper, and the ketchup is the Statue of Liberty--

HELEN
Can we get back to the shooter?

The snitches reluctantly replace the condiments.

BIG SNITCH
Right. So, what was his gimmick?

BRADY
No idea. One second he's there, the next he's all over the place, just a bunch of parts.

BIG SNITCH
All over the place--what does that mean?

Brady and Helen look at each other, silently deciding how much they want to tell these con men. They come to a conclusion.

HELEN
He made it appear that he turned into a mannequin in the middle of a room full of armed FBI agents.

The snitches exchange ominous looks. The little snitch cups his hands over his ears like he doesn't want to hear any more.

BIG SNITCH
Sorry. Can't help you.

BRADY
No help, no money.

BIG SNITCH
No amount of money is worth it, my friend.

The two snitches slide out of the booth and stand.

BRADY
Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the hell is this? I can't believe you're playing us.

BIG SNITCH
(leaning close to BRADY)
You have no idea what it means to be played. Now, if you'll excuse us, we're late for a poker game.

They turn to leave.

BRADY
Oh, come on! You can't leave me with nothing!

The snitches pause. The big snitch turns around.

BIG SNITCH
This agent who got killed--you say he was shot?

HELEN
That's right.

BIG SNITCH
Check again.

They join the dark-haired man and the blond woman at the bar, then go through the door to the back room.

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS

Brady and Helen walking down a hallway, in a hurry.

HELEN
We're going to be late.

BRADY
I know.

Ahead, the door to the briefing room opens and a bunch of FBI agents start filing out. Whatever meeting Brady and Helen were going to, they missed it.

BRADY
Shit!

The exiting agents are all talking in low tones, a general air of incredulity over them. Brady grabs one by the arm.

BRADY
What's the deal?

FBI AGENT
It's the goddamnest thing I've ever heard.

He breaks away, leaving Brady behind.

HELEN
Well, that helps.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - BRIEFING ROOM

Besides the few straggling agents who are slow to leave, the SECTION CHIEF is the only one in the room. He sees Brady and points to his watch.

BRADY
Yeah, yeah, I know.

SECTION CHIEF
Don't give me "I know." This is the wrong day to piss me off, Wells. The director wants results, and he doesn't care how he gets them. You know what that means? It means I've got carte blanche to kick your ass up and down the Potomac if I think it'll get this case wrapped up. Since you're late, I'll give you the short version. The autopsy on Johnson came up inconclusive, so we're back to square one.

BRADY
Inconclusive? The guy was shot at point blank range. Isn't that about as conclusive as they get?

SECTION CHIEF
Tell it to the medical examiner--he's expecting you ... five minutes ago.

INT. MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE

CU ON A HUMAN EYEBALL - the eyelid's held open by gloved fingers. A small but bright light shines into the eye. The pupil contracts. The light moves away. The pupil dilates.

OFFICE

Larry Johnson's body is laid out on an examining table, a sheet pulled up to its shoulders. The MEDICAL EXAMINER--an efficient, soft-spoken old pro--leans over the body, examining it with a penlight.

HELEN
Should his eye be doing that?

MEDICAL EXAMINER
No, it should not. There is no heartbeat, no activity in the brain ... flat lines all around.

Brady and Helen watch as the medical examiner does the trick with the light a few more times.

HELEN
That's really messed up.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
Yes, it is. But then, that's true about a lot of aspects of this case.

BRADY
How do you mean?

MEDICAL EXAMINER

The cause of death, for one thing.

BRADY
We were told the results were inconclusive.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
Oh, no. The results were not inconclusive. They were just somewhat...

HELEN
Messed up.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
Exactly.

He takes a clipboard and reads from the official report.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
Lawrence Johnson, Caucasian male, age forty-eight. Occupation: senior detective, Federal Bureau of Investigation, blah blah blah. Cause of death: severe myocardial infarction precipitated by liberation of aortic emboli.
(he drops the clipboard)
Heart attack.

HELEN
What?

BRADY
What about the gunshot wounds?

MEDICAL EXAMINER
See for yourself.

The medical examiner pulls the sheet down, exposing Larry Johnson's torso. Apart from a Y-shaped incision up the middle of the chest and abdomen, there isn't a mark on him.

BRADY
Well, fuck me.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
No entry wounds. No exit wounds. No bullets found inside or in proximity to the body of the deceased.

HELEN
So, a guy empties a forty-four at this man, and he dies of a plain old heart attack.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
No, not plain old. This guy had the Mt. St. Helens of heart attacks. See, most heart attacks are caused by a clot cutting off the supply of blood to the heart. Just one clot can put you in a wheelchair for the rest of your life. Two clots will put you in the ground. Agent Johnson here suffered no less

than six simultaneous blood clots. It was like a total system malfunction. He was dead before he hit the floor.

BRADY
Six clots ... six shots.

HELEN
Then what's the deal with his eyes?

The M.E. leans over Johnson's body again.

JOHNSON'S POV - looking up through a FISH EYE LENS we see the medical examiner leaning over, shining the penlight INTO THE CAMERA, then out.

MEDICAL EXAMINER
There are numerous examples of postmortem muscle activity, but it's typically manifested in the arms and legs, not in the eyes. In my experience, I've never seen anything like it.

The medical examiner pulls the sheet up over Johnson's face, COVERING THE CAMERA.

BRADY (O.S.)
(whispering to HELEN)
I have.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM

Helen is sitting as Brady sets up a VCR and video monitor. An evidence box is on the table.

BRADY
This was, like, five years ago, before I joined the Bureau. Larry Johnson and his partner were following this scam. Psychic hotline. Television spots ran for it on local channels in the Midwest. (the television comes on) There we go.

Brady takes a video cassette out of the evidence box.

BRADY
Here's one of them.

He jams the tape in the VCR. The screen goes from black to snow to--

COMMERCIAL - Gaudy red letters: "The Mystery Line," along with an 800 number. The words dissolve into the image of an ECSTATIC WOMAN waving a slip of paper.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
What lottery numbers will make you rich?

... the picture changes to a LONELY MAN staring longingly at a PRETTY WOMAN across a crowded room ...

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

How can you make that special
someone notice you?

... changes to a YOUNG WOMAN sitting thoughtfully, chin cupped in one hand ...

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
What is your purpose in life?

... changes to an OLD WOMAN IN BLACK standing forlornly next to a fresh grave ...

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
When will you die?

... and finally dissolves into a blandly handsome BLOND MAN sitting at desk. A heavy black rotary-style phone is the only thing on the desk.

HELEN
Looks a bit like our killer
mannequin.

BRADY
Maybe a little.

BLOND MAN (ON COMMERCIAL)
The Mystery Line has the
answers to all your questions.

The man holds up the receiver and looks piercingly into the camera.

BLOND MAN
Call now,
if you really want to know.

OFFICE

Brady PAUSES the commercial. The blond man is frozen in place, receiver extended.

HELEN
A clear-cut violation of FCC codes. You can't tell people when they're going to die or promise them winning lottery tickets.

Brady EJECTS the tape and gets another one out of the evidence box, sliding it into the VCR.

BRADY
The FCC stuff had nothing to do with it.
Thirty-three people were found dead--phone in their hand, still connected to the Mystery Line.

On the VIDEO, a hand-held camera documents the interior of an apartment. Several FBI agents stand over the body of a middle-aged woman, her dead eyes open and staring. A telephone receiver is locked in her fist. In the background we can hear television STATIC.

BRADY
(pointing to the screen)
Here--check this out.

On the VIDEO, an agent takes a penlight and inspects the dead woman's eyes. The pupils contract as the light hits them.

HELEN
They were all like that?

BRADY
Every one of them.

HELEN
What killed them?

BRADY
Heart attack. Aneurysm.
Stroke. Natural causes, every
one of them.

On the VIDEO, RICKY SMITH is giving orders. He turns to the camera--

RICKY SMITH (ON VIDEO)
Get that thing out of my face!

Brady again PAUSES the tape, freezing Ricky.

HELEN
Who's that guy?

BRADY
That's Ricky Smith. He was
Larry Johnson's partner at the
time. I guess he had a
reputation as kind of a son of
a bitch. But from what I've
see in these reports, he was a
hell Of an agent. Meticulous.
Some might say obsessive.

HELEN
You ever meet him?

BRADY
Once, about the time the whole Mystery Line thing blew up. Smith and Johnson first tried following the money, but none of the victims were ever actually charged for the phone calls, so that was a dead end. They eventually traced the phone number to this old warehouse in Detroit. I was Detroit PD at the time, but I'd been trying to get into the FBI for a while. Whenever something federal would come around, I'd volunteer for it.

HELEN
We had a name for guys like you down in Florida. Wanna-be.

BRADY
Yeah, but I got to be. Anyway, we bust into the place in full riot gear, and it's just, like, old boxes and shit. Nobody home. I guess the strain of the investigation got to Ricky, because he had some kind of a nervous breakdown right in the middle of the raid. Had to carry him out of there in a stretcher-- the kind with four-point restraints.

Helen and Brady just look at the paused face of Ricky Smith, frozen into a scowl.

HELEN
So Where's Ricky now?

BRADY
I don't know. After the Mystery Line deal, he and Larry had a falling out. Larry switched to a desk job, analysis or something. He actually helped get me in the FBI. Ricky ... eventually he just quit and kind of disappeared. Probably flycasting somewhere in New Mexico right now.

HELEN
Well, since he's the only other guy who's had any real experience with this thing, don't you think it'd be nice to know where he disappeared to?

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - RECORDS CENTER

Brady and Helen stand at a counter that looks like a library reference desk, waiting.

A RECORDS AGENT WALKS UP TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COUNTER, A COMPUTER PRINTOUT IN HIS HAND.

RECORDS AGENT

Smith, Richard J., Federal Bureau of Investigation 1976 to 1996.

BRADY
That's our man.

RECORDS AGENT
I know this is part of the whole Larry Johnson business, but I have to tell you, I can't give you full access to the guy's file without authorization.

HELEN
We don't need the whole file. We just need to know his current address.

RECORDS AGENT
Oh, that's no problem. We keep pretty good tabs on former agents. You know, just in case.

BRADY
In case what?

RECORDS AGENT
In case they've developed some kind of a grudge against their former employer and decide one day to buy a van and a bunch of fertilizer,
(he flips through the printout)

Criminal Division ...
voluntary dismissal, 1996 ...
principal residence ... uh-oh.

HELEN
What?

RECORDS AGENT
We've got his address as being in Georgetown, only he hasn't lived there in two years.

BRADY
He moved?

RECORDS AGENT
Nope--"unexplained abandonment."

BRADY
What does that mean?

RECORDS AGENT
It means one day he just stopped showing up.
(he flips through the printout some more)
All his utilities--electricity, gas, phone--he stopped paying on them in the same month.

BRADY
Maybe he moved away and didn't give a forwarding address.

RECORDS AGENT

Trust me, we'd know. That's what we do. These things may just look like a bunch of numbers to you, but there's patterns in there. Little clues. I can look at one of these and tell you if a guy changed his name to avoid paying his ex-wife alimony, hit the road to become a drum tech for Cheap Trick, shaved his head and Joined a cult, whatever. When a person's vitals just peter out like this--
(he holds up the printout)
--it usually means one thing.

HELEN
He's dead.

RECORDS AGENT
Bingo.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - HALLWAY.

Helen and Brady step tiredly out of the Records Room door.

BRADY
This doesn't make sense. A guy like Ricky Smith doesn't just fall off the face of the earth. I mean, you should see his reports. They're like a fucking card catalog, all

cross-referenced and shit.
This isn't the kind of guy who
just stops paying his bills
one day.

HELEN
Maybe it's like the records
guy said. Maybe Ricky Smith's
dead.

BRADY
I don't know ... I don't know.

HELEN
(looking at her watch)
Well, as first days on the job
go, this has definitely been
my weirdest. I'm going to go
home and crash.

BRADY
Yeah, okay. I'll see you
tomorrow.

Helen walks away slowly. Brady stays put, thinking.

CUT TO:

EXT. JOEY'S GAME ROOM - NIGHT

The streets are quiet. The two snitches exit the bar in a good mood, each counting a wad of bills. Evidently the poker game went well for them.

BRADY (O.S.)
How did you know?

The snitches nearly jump. Brady steps out of shadows.

BIG SNITCH
Christ, Wells, what the fuck are you doing hiding in the fucking shadows?

BRADY
Larry Johnson. How did you know?

BIG SNITCH
I didn't, not exactly. It just sounded familiar. There used to be an old joke among magicians, or at least some of us, that the ultimate trick would be so convincing it could actually kill someone. Tricked to death, you could say. Sounds like your terrorist figured out how to pull it off.

Both snitches look around, like they think they're being watched.

BIG SNITCH
Fuck, we shouldn't even be talking.

BRADY
Why? We talk all the time.

BIG SNITCH

This is different. Let me ask you ... how deep in this shit are you?

BRADY
About to my neck.

BIG SNITCH
Any chance you could hang back on this one? Let someone else handle it?

BRADY
Can't and won't.

BIG SNITCH
(looking around again)
Look, Wells, you're not the brightest guy I ever met, but you seem pretty okay for a Fed, so let me ask you something. If I was one of those old-time sailors who had spent all his life at sea, one of those crusty old barnacles who could read the water like it was the morning news, and I told you there was a storm coming, you'd get your boat out of the water, wouldn't you?

BRADY
I guess.

BIG SNITCH

We've been doing this all our lives. There's a storm coming. Get your boat the fuck out of the water.

They turn their backs to Brady and walk away.

CUT TO:

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

A typical middle-income apartment building in the D.C. area.

INT. BRADY'S BEDROOM

Brady, shirtless, sleeping in a tangle of bedsheets. Hands twitching, face a scowl, eyes darting under closed lids. The room is bathed in the blue-gray glow from a television.

The sound of the television is slowly drowned out by a ROARING SOUND like an approaching tornado. As it gets louder, Brady gets more and more agitated.

Suddenly Brady SITS BOLT UPRIGHT in bed, face slick with sweat. At the same moment the ROARING STOPS. It takes a few moments for Brady to catch his breath.

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - MORNING

Helen is sitting at a desk, looking pissed off. Brady walks up holding two coffees and a wax paper bag.

HELEN
At my orientation they told me that violation of core time was a dismissable offense.

BRADY
"Violation of core time?" Is that what they're calling it now? When I started they just said don't be late.
(handing Helen a coffee)
Here. I hope black is okay-- they only had powdered creamer.

HELEN
Thank you, black is fine.

BRADY
(reaching into the paper bag)
And I got you one of these.

He hands Helen a muffin, then pulls out another one for himself. Helen eyes the muffin suspiciously.

HELEN
What's that?

BRADY
It's a bran muffin.
(Helen just looks at him)
What? I have one of these with my coffee every morning.

HELEN

So does that mean we'll need to stop off in an hour so you can take a dump?

BRADY
More like ninety minutes. What do you mean "stop off?"

HELEN
We've got orders to hit the road. Our flight leaves in two hours.

BRADY
No shit? Where to?

HELEN
(standing up)
Arizona.

She walks away.

BRADY
Arizona?

CUT TO:

EXT. DULLES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY

One of the nation's busiest airports, in full swing.

INT. AIRPLANE

A full flight--every seat is taken. The plane is starting to push away from the gate, and the

flight attendants are beginning their safety spiel.

Helen and Brady are seated one row apart. Brady has to lean forward over the seat to talk to her.

BRADY
Cheap-asses at the Bureau. Couldn't even seat us next to each other. I guess we should be glad they put us on the same flight, at least.

HELEN
I know. I'm glad.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT
(to BRADY)
Sir, you're going to have to sit back.

BRADY
Sorry.

He sits back. A few seconds later he's leaning over the seat again.

BRADY
Let me see it.

HELEN
What?

BRADY
The thing.

HELEN

Why?

BRADY
Because I want to. Jeez, what are you, my mom?

A heavy sigh from Helen. She takes a small briefcase out of the storage area at her feet, opens it, removes a plastic bag, kind of like a Ziploc but with a red band and the word "Evidence." She hands the bag over her shoulder.

HELEN
Don't mess it up.

BRADY
I'm a federal agent too, you know. I think I can handle evidence without messing it up.

He inspects the bag. Inside is a receipt slip, the old kind that uses a sheet of carbon paper to make a merchant's copy.

CU ON RECEIPT - On it, printed in block letters, is the name of the merchant and a receipt number. Apart from the name and address of the merchant, the receipt is blank.

BRADY
"Illusions of Empire." Does anyone know what kind of place this is?

HELEN

I think that's the whole
reason they're sending us out
there.

BRADY
But there's nothing on here.

HELEN
Check out the back.

Brady turns the receipt over. On the back, in a neat but somehow antiquated hand, is a map showing a few nameless roads. Along one road is a box labeled "Yellow House."

Brady leans forward again.

BRADY
"Yellow House"? What the hell
does that mean?

HELEN
How do I know?

BRADY
If you ask me, this is a
pretty weak clue.

HELEN
It's a pretty weak case.

BRADY
Waste of our fucking time.

HELEN
I hate to break this to you,
Wells, but I don't think we're

the Bureau's starting line on this one. The real case is back in Washington. We're just tying up the loose threads.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT
(to BRADY)
Sir, the pilot can't begin takeoff until you sit back in your seat.

Brady drops dejectedly into his seat.

BRADY
(to himself)
This case sucks.

CUT TO:

EXT. EMPIRE, ARIZONA - DAY

A nasty and desolate section of desert. Though there are mountains on the horizon, this area is flat and brown.

Two highways, bleached and cracked, intersect here under a flashing yellow traffic light. At one corner is a gas station. Across from it is a building that obviously used to be a gas station, but has been transformed into Illusions of Empire. The sunblistered exterior is decorated with gaudy astrological symbols.

A nondescript rental car pulls into the parking lot, making it the only car there.

INT. ILLUSIONS OF EMPIRE MAGIC SHOP

The place looks like an old basement. Shelves bow under the weight of boxes. One wall is devoted entirely to ventriloquist dummies.

A small bell RINGS pathetically as Brady and Helen enter. Brady looks around and grins.

BRADY
Wow--there was a place just like this near where I grew up.

He takes down one of the dummies--the label reads "My name is Laffo!"--and clumsily manipulates the mouth.

BRADY
(mumbling through clenched teeth)
Hi there, kids! My name's Laffo!

DUMMY'S POV - FISH-EYE on Brady, his comic smile. Helen is looking at Brady the way a mother looks at a misbehaving child.

SHOPKEEP (O.S.)
That one and Reggie McRascal are on sale ...

Illusion of Empire's SHOPKEEP is standing behind the counter. He looks like some small-time hustler out of an old gangster movie: greasy hair, thin mustache, smoking an unfiltered cigarette with another one behind his ear.

SHOPKEEP

... 'cept Reggie's broken. The one eye don't open all the way. How can I help you folks today?

Brady puts "Laffo" back on his shelf and flashes his FBI ID.

BRADY
We'd like to ask you about a purchase that was made here.

SHOPKEEP
Sure thing, officer.

Helen hands him the receipt.

HELEN
Can you tell us who made this purchase and what they bought?

The shopkeep looks at the blank receipt, then back up at the agents with a suspicious smile.

SHOPKEEP
You're kidding, right? There ain't nothing on this. Don't look like they bought anything.

HELEN
All the same...

SHOPKEEP
Well, I guess I could check the back. I keep copies of my receipts for taxes. Don't want

to get in trouble with the
Feds, right?

The shopkeep winks, jots down the receipt number and disappears through a tattered curtain into the back.

While they're waiting, Helen checks out some of the magic trick kits on display: "Glass Box Penetration," "Smashed Watch Gimmick," "Nest o' Balls," "Bloody Needle Gag."

Brady is goofing around with a miniature guillotine. He sticks his index finger through the slicing hole and SLAMS the plunger down. The small but razor-sharp blade appears to pass right through his finger. Brady wiggles his finger and smiles.

The shopkeep emerges from the back with another slip of paper.

SHOPKEEP
This must be your lucky day. I found your receipt. I'd say it's about four years old.

He shows the merchant's copy of the receipt to the agents.

SHOPKEEP
Looks like they bought a gag gun. You know, the kind where you pull the trigger and a little flag pops out, "Bang!"

Brady takes the receipt. On it, above the words "Gag Gun, one," in the same oddly ancient handwriting as the map, is an address--222 Main Street, Crampton, Ohio.

HELEN
Why didn't this address show up on our receipt?

SHOPKEEP
Did you try this?

He takes the original receipt from Helen. Producing a lighter from his shirt pocket, the shopkeep places its flame near the paper. Brown lettering fades into view: the address ... the words "Gag Gun, one" ... and, at the bottom, "If you really want to know."

SHOPKEEP
Invisible ink. Hokey as it gets.

HELEN
That doesn't make sense. Forensics tested the paper for chemicals. They would have found traces of the ink.

The shopkeep lights another cigarette.

SHOPKEEP
That's why they call it magic, toots.

The shopkeep starts to hand the original receipt back to the agents, then notices the map on the

back, with the words "Yellow House." A cunning smile splits his face.

SHOPKEEP
Yellow house, huh?

BRADY
Does this mean something to you?

SHOPKEEP
It's probably nothing, but there's this saying among magicians ... not all of them, just certain magicians, the ones that are a little kooky, if you know what I mean.

HELEN
What kind of saying?

SHOPKEEP
"I never want to live in a yellow house."

BRADY
What does it mean?

He takes a long drag off his cigarette, blowing the smoke out his nose.

SHOPKEEP
Dunno. I'm not that kind of magician.

Brady and Helen take back the receipt and head for the exit. As they pass the wall of dummies--

DUMMY'S POV - in the FISH-EYE, we see Brady turn to Helen.

BRADY
I don't know about you, but I'm beginning to think this might be more than a loose thread after all.

HELEN
(pulling out a cell phone)
I'll call Washington and see if we can get on a redeye flight to Ohio.

SHOP

As he turns back to the door, Brady is nearly knocked over by a CLOWN, its face made up into a smile of torturous proportions. For a moment, they are practically nose-to-nose.

The clown mimes brushing itself off before heading into the shop. Brady and Helen step outside. Brady is visibly shaken.

HELEN
You're not one of those people who's scared of clowns, are you?

Inside the shop, we see the clown turn towards the closing door. Slowly and very deliberately, it jams a finger way up into one of its clown nostrils. It is almost an obscene gesture. The door closes.

BRADY
I am now.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPLANE - NIGHT

Most of the passengers are trying to sleep, including--

BRADY

--sleeping between two overweight passengers. His face twitches, his eyelids quiver.

DREAM SEQUENCE - a HAND-HELD CAMERA stalks the halls of an old, dark house. It looks into rooms empty but for tipped-over furniture or moldering cardboard boxes.

AIRPLANE - CU ON BRADY'S FACE

Beads of sweat have formed on his brow.

DREAM

The HAND-HELD climbs a flight of rickety stairs and explores a few more abandoned rooms. We begin to hear that ROARING SOUND, starting low but rising.

AIRPLANE - CU CLOSED EYES

Beneath their lids the eyes are rolling like crazy.

DREAM

Through a door into what might have been a master bedroom, empty now. One wall is covered floor-to-celling by a tattered curtain. The ROARING GETS LOUDER as we approach the curtain, close enough to touch it now. It is NEAR DEAFENING as the curtain is drawn aside--

AIRPLANE - CU CLOSED EYES

The eyes open wide and the sleeper jumps.

It is Helen, not Brady.

She looks shaken, pale. The ROARING sound becomes the WHINE of airplane engines.

PILOT (OVER INTERCOM)
Uh, ladies and gentlemen, it looks like we've got some rough air underneath us. We'd appreciate it if you'd just sit tight, make sure any loose items are stowed in the space under the seat in front of you. We should be on the ground in Cincinnati in about twenty minutes.

Gradually, the plane's passengers all start to wake. The plane trembles some as it hits the turbulent air. Through the windows, we see the sun is starting to rise.

Helen looks over her shoulder at Brady, sitting three rows back on the other side of the aisle. He, too, looks pale, shaken. He mops his sweaty

face with a handkerchief, then notices Helen looking at him. He flashes her a weak thumbs-up.

INT. AIRPORT

Helen is talking on her cell phone, holding her hand against her other ear so she can hear better.

HELEN
... I'm sorry, could you say that again? ... Okay ... Right, I'll tell him ... What time?
(she looks at her watch)
... Sure ... Thank you, sir.

Brady walks up with two coffees and two individually-wrapped muffins. Helen snaps her phone shut.

BRADY
(handing her a coffee and a muffin)
For you. All they had was poppyseed. If it makes you feel better, they're mostly preservatives--completely negates any nutritious content.

HELEN
Thanks.

BRADY
What's the word from Washington?

HELEN
Well, my phone kept breaking up, but what I got wasn't good. You know that terrorist thing they fed to the press?

BRADY
(through a mouthful of muffin)
Uh huh.

HELEN
I guess there was some kind of assassination attempt on the Syrian ambassador. They think it could be in response to the attack on Larry Johnson.

BRADY
Oh, shit. How are the Syrians taking it?

HELEN
Not good. There's rioting outside the U.S. embassy in Damascus. They're calling in the Army to secure the place.

BRADY
Why don't they admit they made it up, or call it a false lead or something?

HELEN
It's too late for that. If they back out now, how's it going to look? "Gee, sorry we almost got your ambassador

killed." They're not going to retract the terrorist story until we've put the Johnson thing to bed, so they can put whatever spin on it they have to.

BRADY
Then let's get moving.

HELEN
Wait ... there's something else.

BRADY
Hm?

HELEN
Those magician guys, your snitches ... somebody killed them.

BRADY
What? Both of them?

HELEN
Both of them.

BRADY
Aww, man. I guess that was bound to happen one of these days, they rip off the wrong guy and end up shot in an alley or--

HELEN

Their heads were out off. The bodies were dumped on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

BRADY
Jesus Christ! Who the fuck would do something like that?

HELEN
I guess you're supposed to find that out when we get done with this.

Brady just stands there, stunned.

HELEN
Come on, one case at a time.

She grabs his arm and leads him away.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROUTE 7, OHIO - DAY

Route 7 traverses a particularly drab section of the already flat and featureless terrain that is Ohio--mile after mile of cornfields, mom-and-pop gas stations, and farmhouses one hard shove away from falling down.

INT. CAR - DAY

Helen driving, Brady in the passenger's seat looking sullen.

HELEN
You always this chatty?

(no response from Brady)
Look, are you okay? You seem to be taking this snitch thing kind of hard. You weren't...

BRADY
(after waiting for Helen to finish her sentence)
Weren't what?

HELEN
You know. There wasn't something... going on with you three, was there?

Brady looks at Helen to see if she's serious. Helen holds a straight face as long as she can, then cracks a smile.

BRADY
Oh, fuck off, just fuck right off.

HELEN
Seriously, you going to be okay?

BRADY
Yeah, I'm going to be okay. Back in Detroit, It seemed like weird shit would happen all the time. I mean really weird shit. I learned that the more out of hand things get, the more important it is to just put your head down and treat it like any other

situation. That's the only way
to work through the really
weird shit.

HELEN
(pointing out the windshield)
Hey, do you see that?

Brady's eyes follow where Helen is pointing. With the flatness of the land, they can see miles in the distance. Ahead, apparently on this same road, is a house.

BRADY
It's a house.

HELEN
It's a yellow house.

Brady squints at the house.

BRADY
What, our yellow house?

HELEN
I don't know. Get the receipt
out of my briefcase.

Brady pulls the briefcase out of the back seat and takes out the receipt, still in the plastic baggie. He examines the hand-drawn map on the back.

HELEN
(also looking at the map)
Is it the same house?

BRADY
I don't know. There aren't any landmarks or anything on this, but I suppose it could be the same one. Maybe our luck is changing after--

HELEN
Shouldn't we be getting closer?

Brady looks up. Though heat waves coming off the asphalt distort the view, the house appears to be in exactly the same place, several miles farther down Route 7. They don't seem to have closed the gap at all.

BRADY
(squinting)
Aren't we?

HELEN
(also squinting)
I don't think so.

BRADY
Speed up or something.

HELEN
I'm already doing ten over. We should be at least halfway there.

BRADY
Maybe ... maybe it's an optical illusion. You know, like when concrete gets hot

and it looks like there's
water on the road?

Their car passes through a copse of trees--a rarity in this barren area--and for a moment, the house is out of their view.

HELEN
That's got to be the dumbest--

They emerge from behind the trees. The yellow house is right in front of them.

Helen STOMPS on the brakes. Brady is slammed against his seat belt. Everything from the back seat is thrown into the front seat. The car comes to a SKIDDING stop in front of the yellow house.

For a few seconds, Brady and Helen sit silently, catching their breath, looking at the yellow house.

BRADY
I guess we'd better check it
out. (Beat) Right?

He looks at Helen, his eyes saying "say no."

HELEN
Right.

BRADY
(resigned)
Right.

EXT. YELLOW HOUSE - DAY

The yellow house is small, but from the outside appears well maintained. The front porch is painted white, with flowery accents. Under the front door is a fancy welcome mat.

Brady and Helen climb the steps cautiously. They KNOCK on the door. No answer. Brady tries the doorknob--unlocked.

BRADY
One of those neighborhoods.

INT. YELLOW HOUSE

They enter. The inside of the yellow house is as uninviting as the exterior is welcoming: dark, musty, and overwhelmingly claustrophobic. It looks more like a nest than a home.

BRADY
Hello?

Brady nearly trips over a bunch of tin cans that are stacked near the front door, knocking them all over. He holds a can up for Helen to Bee. Its label reads, "POTTED MEAT."

HELEN
Yummy.

From OFFSCREEN comes the unmistakable sound of a SHOTGUN RACKING. Brady and Helen spin to face the sound, their guns drawn.

BRADY AND HELEN
FBI!

Standing in the narrow hallway, mostly hidden in shadow, is a LARGE-BODIED MAN with a bushy, unkempt beard and wild, feral eyes, shaky hands gripping a sawed-off shotgun. He has the crazed look of someone who hasn't slept in a long, long time.

HELEN
Drop it!

He complies, though whether out of obedience or fatigue it's impossible to tell. A second after the shotgun hits the floor Brady has him face-down, arms pinned.

BEARDED MAN
Officer Wells, right?

BRADY
Huh?

BEARDED MAN
Sorry, I guess it's Agent Wells, now.

Brady turns the man over a little to get a better look at his face. With a look of shock, he recognizes him.

BRADY
Ricky Smith?

RICKY nods. Brady lets him up. Wasted and apparently exhausted, Ricky bears little resemblance to the son of a bitch from the crime-scene video.

BRADY
Holy shit.

HELEN
What happened to you?

RICKY
You don't really want to know.

He drops into a chair.

RICKY
What brings the FBI out here,
to the middle of nowhere?

HELEN
It's Larry Johnson. He's dead.

Ricky smiles wryly.

RICKY
Lucky bastard.

CUT TO:

INT. YELLOW HOUSE - KITCHEN

Another squalid little room in this squalid little house, decor courtesy of K-Mart, circa 1956.

Brady and Helen have brought Ricky up to date on their investigation of Johnson's murder, and are now hitting him with a barrage of questions. Ricky's head ping-pongs between them as they interrogate him.

BRADY

Are you sure there's nothing you can tell us that might help us out? Something about the Mystery Line case, maybe?

RICKY
I'm sorry, Agent Wells. It was a long time ago.

HELEN
Had you spoken with Johnson recently?

RICKY
My relationship with the Bureau ended six years ago. That included Larry Johnson.

BRADY
I heard that it ended on a sour note.

RICKY
Larry and I had trouble seeing things the same way.

HELEN
So how did you end up here? "The middle of nowhere"--your words.

RICKY
I like it out here, in the heartland. Once you live here you never want to live anywhere else. It's real.

BRADY
Compared to what?

Brady and Helen aren't buying it, and Ricky knows it. In an attempt to change the subject, he silently stands, opens a drawer, and pulls out a pack of playing cards.

RICKY
Do you like card tricks? I don't care for them myself, but some people do seem to enjoy such things. Magic. Illusion. Smarmy little creeps in tuxedoes. All that nonsense.

Ricky shuffles the cards. He fans the deck face-down.

RICKY
Take a card.

BRADY
I don't really appreciate you-
-

RICKY
Please take a card, Agent Wells.

Reluctantly, Brady draws a card--the Eight of Spades.

RICKY
Now place it back in the deck. Anywhere you like.

Brady slips the card back into the deck. Ricky mixes the pack again, using a rather theatrical one-handed shuffle.

HELEN
I thought you didn't care for card tricks.

RICKY
You pick these things up along the way.

He fans the cards face-up and lays them on the table.

BRADY
(sarcastically)
Well, I'll be. No Eight of Spades. My nephew does that trick every year at Christmas. Except he always says "Ala peanut-butter sandwiches" at the end. You stick it up your sleeve or ditch it under the table?

RICKY
It's in your partner's left hand.

Helen's hands have been in her coat pockets the whole time. She removes her left hand. In her left palm she is cupping the Sight of Spades.

HELEN
(to RICKY)
You put the card in my pocket.

RICKY
I assure you, I did not.

HELEN
Then it must have been there before.

BRADY
Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

RICKY
This illustrates a very basic precept of human psychology-- that, when faced with an illogical situation, the mind searches for the most logical explanation. And in magic, as in everything else, the most logical explanation is almost always the right one. Because there is no such thing as magic.

Ricky pulls a folded piece of paper out of his pocket.

RICKY
This came through my mail slot a few hours ago.

He unfolds it and hands it to Helen. She reads the words, written in that now-familiar script, out loud.

HELEN

"She is holding the Eight of Spades in her left hand."
(she hands it back)
That's impossible.

RICKY
I would tend to agree.

BRADY
Any idea who sent it?

RICKY
That's a question I'm afraid I can't answer.

HELEN
Can't? Or won't?

RICKY
Bit of both, I suppose.

Brady produces the magic shop receipt.

BRADY
You could say this came through our mail slot, too. It was found on the ... man who killed Larry Johnson.

RICKY
(reading the receipt)
"If you really want to know."
Where have I heard that before?

He hands the receipt back to Brady.

RICKY
Let me ask you both something, agents. How far do you want to take this?

HELEN
What do you mean?

RICKY
I mean I think you should forget the whole thing, Get in your car, drive to Cincinnati, get on a plane back to Washington. If you leave soon, you'll probably be home in time for "Law and Order." You can tell the Director that the lead didn't pan out, that Ricky Smith is a crackpot living like a hermit in buttfuck Ohio. There are plenty of people at the Bureau that'll be happy to hear that one. But if I help you with this, if I tell you whatever it is you think I know, then you're stuck--you have to see it through to the end. I'm giving you a chance to walk away. That's better than I ever got.

BRADY
(a little frustrated)
Ricky, we're not on a social call here. An FBI agent is

dead, killed right in the middle of the J. Edgar fucking Hoover Building, and the Director has taken it a little personally. Just labeling this thing "unsolved" and letting it go ... that's not really an option for us.

RICKY
Then I'll tell you this: the address on your receipt there, 222 Main Street? It's a fix-it shop run by a guy named Fred something. It's closed most of the time, like just about everything in that shitty little town. Who knows, you might get lucky. But don't be surprised if it all turns out to be nothing. Hopefully you can still make that plane home tonight.

HELEN
I'm pretty sure us making it home tonight is low on the Director's list of priorities.

RICKY
Well, if for any reason you find yourselves stuck in town overnight, you're welcome to stay here.

Brady and Helen look at each other, then at the general squalor of the yellow house.

BRADY
Yeah, thanks.
(pulling out a notebook and pen)
Look, just in case we need to get in contact with you, what's your phone number?

RICKY
Don't have a phone number. Don't have a phone.

HELEN
You don't have a telephone?

RICKY
Nope.

Brady hands Ricky his cell phone.

BRADY
I want you to take this, then.

Ricky won't touch it. Brady sets it on the table.

BRADY
Sweeten--give him your cell phone number.

Helen writes a number on Brady's pad and tears off the sheet for Ricky.

BRADY

Call us if you remember
anything you think we ought to
know.

EXT. YELLOW HOUSE - DAY

Ricky standing by the door as the agents exit. Helen steps out of the house. Brady hangs back.

BRADY
Ricky, I've got to ask--what
happened to you in that
warehouse? What could spook a
guy like you that bad?

Ricky considers this carefully.

RICKY
You don't get to ask me that.
Not yet.

BRADY
Not yet? Then when?

RICKY
Hopefully never.

Ricky closes the door in Brady's face.

EXT. CRAMPTON, MAIN STREET - DAY

"Shitty little town" does not even begin to describe this desolate burg. Many of the buildings appear to be abandoned. There seems to be only three active businesses: the "Fix-It and Supply" shop, the Oasis Motel, and a diner apparently called "EAT HERE."

INT. CAR

Brady and Helen rolling slowly down Main Street, taking in the bleak little failure that is Crampton.

BRADY
(singing)
See the U.S.A. ... In your
Chev-ro-lat...

HELEN
God bless the Midwest.

BRADY
And I thought Detroit was bad.

EXT. MAIN STREET

The car pulls up in front of the "Fix-It and Supply Shop." The agents get out and try the door. It's locked.

BRADY
(knocking on the door)
Hello? Hello?

HELEN
Wells ...

She points to a sign on a window--"BACK AT" and a little clock. The hands point to four o'clock. Brady checks his watch.

BRADY
We've got about a half hour
before Fred's due back. Want

to get something to eat or
something?

HELEN
Wells, take a look at this.

In the window, next to the "BACK AT" sign, is a yellow flyer. Across the top, in big letters! "Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism -- Three o'clock Tomorrow at the Masonic Hall." Just below that, a clown's grinning face.

BRADY
I think I've seen enough magic
tricks for one trip.

HELEN
No, look at the bottom.

There it is, at the bottom of the advertisement: "Sponsored by Illusions of Empire."

BRADY
Well, shit.

HELEN
Feel like getting a sneak
preview?

EXT. MASONIC HALL

From the outside, the Masonic Hall looks like every Other ruined, abandoned building along Main Street, except for the Masonic symbols adorning its face. Brady stands contemplating these.

HELEN

What?

BRADY
My Uncle Ray had a real burr up his butt about the Masons. When I was a kid, he'd go on about how there are thousands of these halls in cities all over the world, but hardly anyone knows where the Freemasons came from-- originally, I mean. They were like the first big cult. I guess some people traced them all the way back to a sect of ancient Egyptians--

HELEN
--who were actually a race of aliens who used the pyramids as a device for communicating with their home world, and now the Masons are attempting to take over the modern telecommunications networks to accomplish the same goal. Right?

BRADY
It sounded a lot more convincing when Uncle Ray said it.

Helen tries the hall's main door. It is unlocked. She pushes it open and the agents look inside. Pitch black.

BRADY
Looks like a flashlight Job.

HELEN
Great.

INT. MASONIC HALL

A flashlight beam slices through the darkness. Then two.

Even by flashlight, it's obvious the Masonic Hall is a total disaster: broken chairs and debris litter the floor, dust and filth has accumulated in piles in the corners.

HELEN
What time was that show tomorrow?

BRADY
Three o'clock.

HELEN
I don't think they're going to make it.

The flashlight beams scan the vast room in different directions. They converge on the far side of the room, which is dominated by a stage. Like the rest of the hall, the stage is a wreck--wood planking rotted, buckled, or just plain missing.

HELEN
I get a really weird vibe off this place.

BRADY
(looking toward the ceiling)
Yeah--like it's going to collapse on top of us.

HELEN
No, more like ... this sounds stupid ... like we're being watched.

Brady shines his flashlight around the old building for a few seconds.

BRADY
You're right. (Beat) That is stupid.

The beam of the flashlight stops on a small door just to the right of the stage.

BRADY
What's that back there?

INT. MASONIC HALL - OFFICE

The agents enter the tiny room flashlights first. It contains what is apparently the only piece of furniture in the whole building; an old, plain desk. A heavy black rotary-style phone sits on the desk.

HELEN
Does this look familiar at all?

BRADY

The Mystery Line commercial.
They must have taped it in
here.

Brady goes over to the desk. He reaches for the telephone receiver cautiously, like he's about to pick up a live rattlesnake. He lifts the receiver off the cradle and starts to bring it to his ear, moving slowly, as though under some spell. He places it to his ear--

HELEN
Uh, Wells?

Brady blinks like he's just been woke up. He shines his flashlight towards Helen. She is holding up the end of the telephone cord--frayed, wires dangling, like it had been torn out of the wall long ago.

Brady, a little embarrassed, sets the receiver back in its cradle.

BRADY
I thought there might be ... I
don't know what I thought.

HELEN
Let's get out of here.

INT. MASONIC HALL

FISH-EYE LOOKING DOWN - we see Brady and Helen exit the little office far below and make their way out of the Masonic Hall.

HALL - LOOKING UP - almost lost in the shadows, TWO SEVERED HEADS dangle above the stage, tied to the rafters by knotted cords. The heads of the two snitches.

EXT. MAIN STREET - EVENING

Brady and Helen exit the ruined hall, overcoats dusty, hair full of cobwebs.

BRADY
I need something to eat.

HELEN
I need a long shower. Hey, look...

Across the street, the Fix-It and Supply Shop's sign has been turned around to read "OPEN FOR BUSINESS." Inside, a figure can be seen working.

Helen begins crossing the street. Brady stands there.

BRADY
You sure we can't get some dinner first and then talk to this guy?

HELEN
Are you coming or not?

BRADY
(following)
Fine.

INT. FIX-IT AND SUPPLY SHOP

FRED, a man in his mid-sixties, is hunched over some obscure gizmo, working at it with tiny tools. He's wearing a pair of glasses, one lens of which has been fitted with a jeweler's magnifying eyepiece.

A small bell RINGS as Brady and Helen enter the Fix-It shop. Fred does not look up.

HELEN
Excuse me?

Still nothing from Fred.

HELEN
Excuse me? I'm Agent Sweeten.
This is Agent Wells. (Beat)
We're with the FBI.

FRED
(concentrating on his gizmo)
I'm closed.

BRADY
No, you were closed. Now
you're open. See ...
(he points to the OPEN FOR
BUSINESS sign)
... says so right here.

FRED
I guess you FBI types are way
too smart for me.

Fred goes back to ignoring the agents.

HELEN

Sir, we're here on an
investigation.

She holds up the receipt from Illusions of Empire.

HELEN
Maybe you could tell us how
your shop's address turned up
on this receipt.

With a sigh full of irritation, Fred finally gets up from his workbench to examine the receipt.

FRED
(reading slowly)
"Illusions ... of ... Empire."
Magic shop? I've never been
too interested in magic.

Fred squints, reading through the magnifying eyepiece.

FRED
Why, that ain't even my
handwriting. I'm sorry, I
don't think I can help you.

BRADY
Sir, I'm sure you're a very
busy man, but this is kind of
a serious matter.

Outside, an old van--the kind with no windows along its sides--pulls in front of the shop.

FRED

Listen, agent whoever you are,
I don't belong to any militia
and I ain't never done
anything illegal, least not
that I know of. I'm just
trying to run a business here.

HELEN
Can you at least give us some
idea of the kind of work you
do? It might help us to piece
this thing together.

FRED
I take whatever jobs come my
way. Usually it's parts.

BRADY
Parts of what?

FRED
Parts of whatever. Y'know,
bits and pieces.

Fred holds up his gizmo as an example. Even up close, the thing offers no clue as to what it is or what it does.

FRED
I don't typically know what
the whole thing looks like,
and to tell you the truth I
don't much care. I just get
the parts working, and let the
rest sort itself out. Now,
however serious it might seem,
this business that brought you

here ... offhand I'd say
someone is having some fun at
your expense.

Outside, the van's side door slides open and a FRECKLE-FACED KID pops out. Fred sees him through the window.

FRED
Excuse me, I have a real
customer.

The kid enters and Fred waves him over to the far end of the counter, away from the agents.

HELEN
What do you think?

BRADY
I think maybe he's right.
Someone's fucking with our
heads.

HELEN
So, what, we give up?

BRADY
Give up what? There isn't
anything to give up. Fred here
doesn't exactly seem like a
criminal mastermind.

HELEN
Listen to the case, not the
suspect. The case led us here.

Fred retrieves something from a shelf, a package of some sort wrapped in oilstained brown paper and held together with twine. Fred and the kid speak in WHISPERS so they cannot be overheard. Fred seems to be giving the kid some kind of instructions.

BRADY
But the case doesn't make any sense!

HELEN
We're government agents--we're not supposed to care about what makes sense. (Beat) You know what I mean.

The kid nods. He takes the package and exits the shop.

HELEN
(to FRED)
We'd like to ask you a couple more questions.

FRED
No. I'm closing up for the night. I'm going to have to ask you to leave.

BRADY
I'm sure it will just take a few minutes.

FRED
I'll tell you what. It's my dinner time. If you really

want to talk that bad, we can
talk over at the diner.

He takes a ratty coat off a hook and walks Brady and Helen to the front door.

FRED
I got to go out the back to
turn the lights off. I'll meet
you out front and we can walk
there together.

EXT. OUTSIDE FIX-IT SHOP - EVENING

Brady and Helen exit the shop. Fred looks the door behind them and turns the sign to "CLOSED." Brady and Helen watch him carefully as he walks to the back of the shop. ALL THE LIGHTS GO OUT.

They wait a few moments. No sign of Fred.

HELEN
Oh, no.

BRADY
(walking toward the back of
the shop)
Come on--how far can the old
geezer have gotten?

They hustle around the corner.

EXT. BACK OF FIX-IT SHOP - EVENING

The rear of the fix-it shop is a blank brick wall, bearing a few stains and patches of crumbling mortar. There is no back door.

HELEN
That's just wonderful.

BRADY
(in disbelief)
Shit.
(then shouting in frustration)
SHIT!

INT. "EAT HERE" DINER

Treacly MUZAK plays to empty tables. An advertisement for the "spectacular" magic show tomorrow at three is taped inside the front window.

Brady and Helen enter and wearily take seats at the counter.

BRADY
Okay, Sweeten, what do we have so far?

HELEN
So far? Nothing I'd care to bring back to Headquarters. Unless you want to haul Ricky Smith to Washington to do card tricks. (Beat) You know what's really strange?

BRADY
You mean apart from this whole fucking day?

HELEN

It's like none of this has anything to do with Larry Johnson's murder anymore. It's all changed.

BRADY
That's what I was talking about in the Fix-It shop. This investigation isn't following the regular pattern. Usually a case gets more focused with every lead you track down. But this one just keeps going and going.

HELEN
Agreed. It's like, Larry Johnson ... then the magic shop ... then Ricky ... I feel like we're on some kind of weird scavenger hunt.

Helen seems on the brink of something, but can't quite articulate it.

HELEN
It all seems so random ... but somehow deliberately random ... like this is all some kind of excuse to ... to--

COUNTERGIRL (O.S.)
Good evening, folks!

Brady and Helen look up sharply. A young COUNTERGIRL Is standing there. She is tall and

very attractive, hut wearing too much makeup, giving her face a waxy appearance.

COUNTERGIRL
Would you like to try the meatloaf tonight?

BRADY
Uh ... yeah, sure.

COUNTERGIRL
And for you, ma'am?

Helen is a little out of it, still trying to hold onto her last thought ... to no avail.

HELEN
Just some coffee for me, thanks.

The countergirl walks away.

BRADY
What were you saying, Sweeten?

HELEN
I can't remember now. Probably wasn't important.

BRADY
Well, I'm going to visit the Men's. Don't eat my meatloaf.

He stands up and walks toward the back of the diner.

INT. DINER - BATHROOM

Two stalls, both with closed doors. One urinal. Lots of white tile.

Brady enters. He steps up to the urinal, starts to unzip his fly, and looks down. The urinal is cracked and broken--unusable.

BRADY
Whoops.

He turns toward the stalls. He pushes on the first door, but it's latched--someone's using it.

BRADY
Sorry, buddy.

He pushes the other door, which swings open.

INT. DINER

Helen sitting at the counter, all alone in the diner. Her CELL PHONE RINGS. She answers it.

HELEN
Helen Sweeten ... What's that?
... I'm sorry, I can barely
hear you ...

INT. DINER - BATHROOM

The sound of BRADY URINATING echoes against the tiled walls.

CU ON BRADY - his face goes from slack contentment to a scowl. His nose twitches as he sniffs the air.

BRADY

(to himself)
Aw, Christ!
(calling out)
Hey, you all right in there, buddy?

His face screws up as another wave of the stench hits him.

BRADY
Oh, mother of god!

INT. DINER

Helen on the phone.

HELEN
... I'm losing you, could you
... ah, shit!

She snaps the phone closed.

INT. DINER - BATHROOM - ON BRADY

Brady is holding his breath now. He shakes off and leaves the stall without flushing. He quickly runs his hands under some hot water.

BRADY
Mister, I think you need to see a doctor about that.

He grabs a few sheets of paper towel and leaves.

The CAMERA PANS DOWN to peer under the stall door. In the still occupied stall we see a pair of shiny

black shoes, like the kind that come with a rented tuxedo. They FLOAT STRAIGHT UP AND OUT OF SIGHT.

INT. DINER

Brady comes back, drying his hands with the paper towel. Helen is obviously upset--somewhere between worried and pissed off.

BRADY
What's the matter with you?

HELEN
I got a call from the section chief, but the connection was pretty bad and he got cut off.

BRADY
Did he have any news?

HELEN
He sounded pretty shaken up, something about the Syrian situation. And I'm pretty sure I heard the word "nuclear."

BRADY
Nuclear ... as in nuclear bomb nuclear?

HELEN
I don't know.

Helen crinkles her nose and then looks at Brady.

HELEN

I guess that bran muffin
finally kicked in, eh?

BRADY
What?
(he sniffs his jacket)
Aw, man! It's in my goddamn
clothes!

HELEN
I think I might have to move
down one seat. No offense.

BRADY
It's not me. Some guy in the
bathroom. You know how they
say red meat stays in your
colon for seven years? I think
this guy was letting all his
go at once.

He removes his jacket and places it several seats down from them.

The countergirl arrives with a cup of coffee and a plate of mashed potatoes and gravy. It looks pretty good for diner food.

COUNTERGIRL
You folks enjoy your dinner.

HELEN
Excuse me, do you have a
public phone I could use?

COUNTERGIRL

I'm sorry--we do, but it's broken.

BRADY
Can I ask you something? How do you--the town, I mean--stay in business? It doesn't seem like there's enough people around here to support it.

COUNTERGIRL
Oh, tourists, mostly.

HELEN
Tourists?

COUNTERGIRL
Oh, sure. We get lots of people Just like you passing through here.

The countergirl nods in the direction of a table toward the back where a OLD COUPLE Is seated. Judging by their colorfully patterned clothes, sunglasses, and cameras, they are tourists. They are scooping chunks of meatloaf and lumps of mashed potatoes into their mouths, seemingly not pausing between bites to swallow. They turn to Brady and Helen and smile, their chins dripping gravy.

Brady looks at his plate.

BRADY
You know, on second thought--

Helen's CELL PHONE RINGS.

HELEN
That's probably the section chief calling back--maybe he got a better connection.
(she answers the phone)
Helen Sweeten.

RICKY (ON PHONE)
Are you two still in town?

HELEN
Yes.

RICKY
Get out. Get out while you still can.

HELEN
What do you--

Ricky hangs up. Helen closes the phone.

HELEN
Wells, that was Ricky Smith. I think something's wrong.

BRADY
Let's go.

EXT. MAIN STREET - EVENING

The agents' car pulls out, then drives past the diner and out of town. A few seconds later, out of the agents' view, ALL THE LIGHTS GO OUT, as if someone pulled the plug on the whole town.

CUT TO:

INT. YELLOW HOUSE - KITCHEN

Brady, Helen, and Ricky talking again in the kitchen. Ricky is agitated.

RICKY
You shouldn't have come here. You should have driven right past and not looked back.

BRADY
No more of this crap, Ricky. If you've got something to tell us, then Just fucking tell us.

RICKY
This came through my mail slot about an hour ago.

He unfolds a sheet of paper and holds it up for them to see: "Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism."

HELEN
They're all over town.

RICKY
This is bad. This is very bad. You don't want to be around tomorrow when this thing happens.

HELEN
We checked out the Masonic Hall. I don't see any spectacular displays happening

in that place. Not tomorrow, not next week, probably not ever.

RICKY
I thought the same thing the first time I went in there.

BRADY
(figuring it out)
You were still investigating the Mystery Line case. Even after you quit the Bureau.

Ricky nods.

BRADY
But, I would have thought that, after ... what happened--

RICKY
After my crack-up? That I would have let it go?

BRADY
Something like that, yeah.

RICKY
Just the opposite. Cases like that were the whole reason I joined the FBI in the first place. The ability to point my finger and say, with all the authority of the Justice Department behind me, "None of this is real. It's all a con."

That was what I lived for. When we looked into the Mystery Line, Larry and I, we could tell it was a front for something, but none of the pieces seemed to fit together. After Detroit, Larry had had it--too many dead ends. But I was in too deep.

BRADY
What happened that night?

RICKY
I got a glimpse of something. Something big. Maybe it was a warning, telling me to back off. Or maybe it was a dare, to see if I'd keep going. Doesn't matter--I've never responded with much wisdom to either warnings or dares. I quit the Bureau and made the Mystery Line my purpose in life. Eventually I ended up in here. Just as you did. I snooped around for while, and like you I went into that old ruin of a hall. And there it was.

HELEN
What?

RICKY

The curtain. The same fucking curtain from the warehouse. And that same sound.
(he bows his head and holds his hands over his ears)
Except this time it almost sounded like a voice ... or maybe more than one voice. Telling me things that didn't make any sense. Telling me to look behind the curtain. (Beat) So I did.

BRADY
Ricky, there was no curtain in the Masonic Hall. Just an empty stage and an old office, kind of like the one...

Brady trails off, but Ricky knows where he's going.

RICKY
Like the one in the Mystery Line commercial?

HELEN
I'm sure it's just a coincidence.

She sounds like she's trying to convince herself of this, and Ricky's not buying it.

RICKY
There is no such thing as coincidence. No fate, no happenstance, no such thing as

good luck or bad luck. Do you think you came to this town by virtue of your own investigative skills? Fuck that. You were brought here.

BRADY
That's a lot of horse shit.

RICKY
Oh, you don't realize it at the time. One thing just sort of leads to another. A map, a murder, a phone call, a message in a fortune cookie. They've got all the gimmicks. You think you're heading in one direction, and the next thing you know you're here--about as far as you can get from where you thought you were going.

HELEN
Let me get this straight--you think there is some kind of conspiracy or something that lured you ... us ... to Crampton?

BRADY
What the hell for?

Ricky sighs.

RICKY

These things I've told you so far, these are true things. You may not believe them, but I know they're true, because they happened to me. But the how's and the why's ... I can only speculate. I could say it's the Illuminati, or the Trilateral Commission, or the Freemasons, but really it's all of that. Every conspiracy theory you've ever heard is Just one little piece of what they can do. Nothing's too small, nothing's too big. You lose your car keys, your wife gets run over by a semi, some nut blows up the capital of Pakistan. Einstein said he didn't believe that God played dice with the universe. Do you understand what he meant by that?

HELEN

He meant that there was order in the universe--there was a comprehensible reason for everything that existed and that everything obeyed certain laws, even if we didn't understand all of those laws yet.

BRADY

Why are we talking about Einstein?

RICKY

Einstein's god may not play dice with the universe ... but they do. They play all kinds of games, maybe just with the world that we know, maybe with the whole fucking universe. Prom our point of view Their power is unthinkable--literally. Our brains just aren't wired to handle it. Maybe there is some kind of purpose and order, some kind of sense to the game They play. But that's not how it seems to me. To me it just seems like this insane power at work at the heart of things... no, not at work--at play. Putting on a flimsy, pointless stageshow. And the only thing that keeps the show going is this crazy, relentless urge for more play. Just to play and play and play. Pure play for the hell of it. All for Their private amusement. That's what killed those people who called the Mystery Line. They wanted the truth, and they got it.

HELEN

What truth did they get?

RICKY
That nothing is real--nothing but Them. And They can do anything They want. They can change the entire landscape of things--make things happen that couldn't possibly happen. Or even undo something that's already happened. Not just here, but anywhere, everywhere they can put on the act. What do you do when you can do anything? Eventually you go insane, until all you want to do is play. Push a button, pull a string, just to see what moves on the other end. That's what the truth is, Agent Sweeten. That the world as we know it is nothing hut a cheap little circus.
(he holds up the magic show flyer)
... and this is going to be the center ring. Unless you want to end up like me, you'll get as far away from here as possible.

HELEN
If it's going to he as bad as you say, why are you still here?

RICKY
(with a humorless smile)
Because there's nowhere to go, not for me. Besides, I think my part of the game is just about played out.
(he looks at his watch)
It's getting late. If you two are going to make Cincinnati tonight, you'd better leave now.

EXT. YELLOW HOUSE - NIGHT

A strong wind has kicked up. Brady and Helen get into their car.

INT. CAR

Brady and Helen both need a few seconds to get their thoughts straight.

BRADY
Well, Sweeten, what do you think of that?

Silence from Helen.

BRADY
Yeah, that's what I think, too. So what do we do now?

HELEN
I say we bag it and head home.

BRADY
What do we tell the chief?

HELEN
Fuck him. I've had it with this case. I'm tired.

BRADY
Okay. We'll just report that Ricky was a dead end. All right?

HELEN
Just drive.

EXT. YELLOW HOUSE - NIGHT

The agents' car pulls out of the driveway just as the rain starts. Ricky watches from the doorway. A look crosses his face--hope, perhaps--and a second later is gone, replaced by weary resignation. He closes the door.

EXT. ROUTE 7 - NIGHT

The rental car, heading out of town, away from Crampton. The storm has gotten pretty bad--rain is slashing across the road nearly horizontally, throwing bits of debris around.

Helen turns on the radio. STATIC. She zips up the dial.

Nothing hut SQUELCH and SNOW, with vague hints of VOICES underneath.

HELEN
Looks like we're out of luck with the--

A BOLT OF LIGHTNING smacks into a tree ahead of them with a BOOM. The trunk nearly EXPLODES, hits of wood fly everywhere. The tree drops into the road.

Brady SLAMS on the brake. The tires lock up. The car skids on the slick road, toward the fallen tree.

Wrenching at the steering wheel, Brady manages to guide the sliding car toward the shoulder, but not quite enough--the front bumper grazes the tree, turning the car sideways in the road. Finally it stops.

Brady and Helen are frozen, their bodies still locked in crash positions. Slowly they loosen up.

HELEN
(looking out the window at the front bumper)
I hope the Bureau sprang for insurance.

BRADY
Christ, look at it out there.

Outside the windows, it looks like the apocalypse--rain pounding down, wind tearing at the land. As they watch, hailstones begin to THUMP against the car's body.

HELEN
Is that hail?

BRADY

That's it--I give up. There's no way I'm driving another three hours to Cinci in this shit. And then get on a fucking plane? Fuck that.

HELEN
Listen...

They sit, silent, still for a few seconds.

BRADY
I don't hear--

HELEN
SHHH!

From outside we hear a FAINT ROARING sound, slowly increasing in volume.

HELEN
I know that sound.

The ROARING gets a little louder. Brady recognizes it, too.

BRADY
Okay, let's go. My obit is not going to say "FBI agent was too stupid to get the fuck off the road."

He gets the car turned around and starts heading back toward Crampton.

EXT. ROUTE 7 - NIGHT

The rental car's headlights barely cut through the torrential rain.

INT. CAR

Brady concentrating on the road. Helen drifting off. Through the windshield, we see the yellow house, brightly lit, like a beacon in the storm.

BRADY
Sweeten?

HELEN
What?

BRADY
Do you think we should pick up Ricky?

HELEN
Why? So the two of you can swap Freemason theories? I don't feel up to another performance of the Ricky Show tonight. Besides, he said it himself--he's not going anywhere.

BRADY
I guess. We can swing by and pick him up on our way out of town tomorrow.

EXT. ROUTE 7 - MIGHT

The car drives past the yellow house, its tail lights disappearing into the storm. A second

later, the lights inside the yellow house ALL GO OUT.

EXT. OASIS MOTEL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The rental car pulls into the parking lot, dripping with rain. Crampton is bone dry, like the storm never even happened.

INT. OASIS MOTEL LOBBY

A cigarette machine, the kind with the pull-knobs. Two faux-leather chairs, cracked by age and sunlight. A gumball dispenser, with a small sign saying the proceeds benefit the local Knights of Columbus.

Brady and Helen enter, their overnight bags over their shoulders.

HELEN
We'll be lucky if anyone's here to check us in.

Brady RINGS the service bell.

TOURIST WOMAN (O.S.)
(in a British accent)
Excuse me, could we take your picture?

Brady and Helen are a little startled--they didn't know there was anyone else in the lobby. Standing across the room from the agents is the OLD COUPLE from the diner.

HELEN

I'm sorry?

TOURIST WOMAN
We, my husband and I, are on a photographic excursion. We'd like to take your picture--you and your husband.

BRADY
We're not married.

TOURIST MAN
(also in a British accent)
But you make such a lovely couple. So natural together.

TOURIST WOMAN
May we take your picture? We're on a photographic excursion, you see. My husband and I.

TOURIST MAN
It would go so nicely in our collection. You make such a lovely couple.

HELEN
I'm not sure that's--

Too late--the woman's camera FLASHES, an explosion of white light. Brady and Helen blink in the glare. By the time they've gotten their vision back the tourist couple is gone, the door slowly closing.

The MANAGER appears from a back room. He's wearing a drab suit with a drab tie. He speaks in quiet, sonorous tones, like an undertaker speaking to the bereaved.

MANAGER
Good evening. How can I help you?

HELEN
We'd like two rooms please.

MANAGER
Certainly. Would you like them adjoining?

Helen looks at Brady, who is fiddling with the gumball machine, trying to get a gumball without paying.

HELEN
That won't be necessary.

MANAGER
All right. Have you stayed with us before?

BRADY
Sweeten...

Helen looks toward Brady. He's holding up a leaflet, an advertisement for the magic show. There's a stack of them on a small table near the entrance.

MANAGER

Ah, yes. Our little magic show. You don't want to miss that. It's the only show in town ... so to speak.
(Flipping open a large ledger book)
Would you please sign here? I'll get your keys.

The manager disappears through a curtain into a back room. Helen takes the pen that is chained to the counter and starts to write in the ledger, then stops.

HELEN
Wells, come look at this.

Brady steps over to the counter.

CU LEDGER - the pages are stained and wrinkled, like someone once spilled water on them. Many of the signatures of past visitors are blurred or smudged to the point of illegibility. The names we can read are all suspiciously anonymous--lots of Smiths, Joneses, and Johnsons.

HELEN
Seems a little odd, don't you think?

BRADY
I'm too tired to tell anymore. Can we just get checked in?

The manager returns. He hands them each a room key.

MANAGER
If there's anything you need, please don't hesitate to ask me. I'm always at the disposal of my guests.

EXT. OASIS MOTEL

Brady and Helen, tired as hell, trudge up the stairs to their second-floor rooms. They reach their doors--numbers 207 and 208.

BRADY
This is my stop.

HELEN
Yep.

BRADY
I should warn you, I like to have the t.v. on at night. It helps me sleep. I'll try to keep the volume down.

HELEN
That's okay--if it's too loud, I'll just come over there and kick your ass.

They unlock and open their doors. The rooms are like mirror images of each other--a sagging bed, an old t.v., a small nightstand supporting a crooked lamp and a clock.

They step into their respective rooms.

INT. BRADY'S MOTEL ROOM

Brady dumps his overnight bag on the bed and turns on the television.

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM

Helen surveys the room, not looking too happy. She switches the television's ON-OPF switch to ON. Nothing. She snaps it back and forth a few times. No deal.

CUT TO:

INT. BRADY'S MOTEL ROOM - LATER

Brady is lounging on the bed watching television. Through the thin wall, the RING of Helen's phone can be heard. Brady doesn't seem to notice.

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM

From the amount of steam in the room and the sound of RUNNING WATER, it looks like Helen is finally taking that shower.

The phone is still RINGING. It's an ancient princess model with a ring like a fire alarm. After five or six RINGS there is a MUFFLED CURSE from inside the bathroom. The WATER STOPS.

INT. BRADY'S MOTEL ROOM

Brady flipping through channels...

Click: An old black-and-white cartoon.

Click: Some artsy-looking thing, shot in negative exposure and accompanied by AIRY SYNTH MUSIC.

Click: STATIC, with a hint of a human image behind.

Click: Another old cartoon.

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM

Helen comes out of the bathroom wrapped in a long bathrobe, hair in a towel, looking pissed. The phone is STILL RINGING.

The steam seems to have thickened. She's trying to reach the phone, but can't quite seem to get there. It's as if she keeps getting set back. The phone is STILL RINGING.

Suddenly time jumps--Helen's got the receiver in her hand, held up to her ear. She looks surprised. We never saw her actually pick up the phone.

HELEN
Hello?

VAGUE NOISES on the other end of the line--static, pops--but no reply.

HELEN
Is that you, Brady?

The NOISES seem to coalesce into something like a VOICE, or SEVERAL VOICES not quite in sync. It doesn't sound like English. It barely sounds human--full of HISSES and GRUNTS.

Helen seems mesmerized for a moment. Then the spell breaks, and she SLAMS the phone down.

INT. BRADY'S MOTEL ROOM

Brady is still channel surfing. He stops on a--

COMMERCIAL

Poor reception, lots of static. Gaudy yellow letters--"The Encyclopedia of the Unknown"--dissolve into a forest scene--someone with a HAND-HELD CAMERA running headlong through the woods, as though running for his life.

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
Do you really want to know the truth about Bigfoot?
... the picture changes to a collection of sunken ships, their hulls split and broken
...

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
... the Bermuda Triangle?
... changes to a YOUNG WOMAN standing in a crowded elevator, casting terrified glances at a MAN IN A SUIT standing next to her ...

MAN'S VOICE (V.O.)
... extra-sensory perception?

... and finally dissolves into a blandly handsome BLOND MAN sitting at desk, a set of encyclopedia-type books stacked in front of him. The poor reception makes the man look gruesome, cadaverous. He stares piercingly into the camera.

BLOND MAN (ON T.V.)
"The Encyclopedia of the Unknown" can give you the answers. There's only one question: Do you really want to know?

The man on screen holds his pose uncomfortably long.

Brady finally changes the channel--CLICK. It's the commercial again.

BLOND MAN
Do you really want to know?

Click: the commercial.

BLOND MAN
Do you really want to know?

Brady scans through the channels faster. Click.

BLOND MAN
--really want to know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
--want to know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
--to know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
--know?

Click.

BLOND MAN
--know?

Click--

The blond man is replaced by a GRAINY VIDEO of a man and a woman talking. The angle is odd--shot from about waist level and looking almost straight up. It is dead silent.

Because of the odd angle, it takes Brady a moment to recognize the two people--himself and Helen, talking in the autopsy room two days before, as seen through Larry Johnson's dead eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM

Helen, in sweats, opens the door to her room. Brady is outside with his overnight bag.

BRADY
Okay, I know you're going to call me paranoid, out I think it might be a good idea if we didn't stay in separate rooms tonight. If it's a problem for you, that's okay, but with all--

HELEN

Come on in.

Brady is surprised to hear Helen agree so quickly. He steps into the room.

HELEN
I'll warn you, the t.v. doesn't work.

BRADY
No problem.

The door SLAMS shut.

CUT TO:

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM - LATER

Helen is on the bed, doing some paperwork. Brady comes out of the bathroom in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms with a toothbrush in his mouth.

BRADY
(a little slurred)
Whatcha working on?

HELEN
Our expense report. I can't figure out the difference between "general" and "miscellaneous."

Brady turns to the sink and finishes brushing his teeth.

HELEN

Wells ... can I ask you something?

BRADY
Shoot.

HELEN
Why did you join the FBI?

BRADY
Got tired of kicking in crack house doors.

HELEN
You could have taken another police assignment for that-- some speedtrap out in the suburbs. What drew you to the Bureau?

BRADY
Do you really want to know? You'll laugh.

HELEN
Try me.

BRADY
You remember the t.v. show The F.B.I.?

HELEN
(laughing)
With Efram Zimbalist, Jr.?

BRADY
Who?

HELEN
The main guy, what's his name ... Erskine.

BRADY
Yeah, that's the show--not the later one, with the guy from Mannix.

HELEN
You're seriously telling me you joined the FBI because of a television show?

BRADY
No, that's bullshit. Just me trying to sound cool. I'm not sure if I can explain what led me to join the Bureau, or even what made me want to be a cop in the first place. It would probably come out something like what Ricky said, you know? Being able to do something about all the bad shit in the world.

HELEN
I think I know what you mean. Except it never seems to end--for every bad thing you turn over there's something worse underneath. And under that ... and under that.

BRADY

You never find that one big thing at the heart of it all. (Beat) Okay, so do I get to ask you something now? Since we're bonding and everything?

HELEN
Sure, go ahead.

BRADY
When we were in the car, during the storm ... you said you'd heard that sound before.

HELEN
Did I? I must have been thinking of that tornado that picked up my house when I was a little girl back in Kansas.

BRADY
Come on--no more bullshit.

HELEN
Right. No more bullshit. (Beat) Do you dream, Wells? I mean, I know everybody dreams, but do you remember your dreams?

BRADY
Sometimes.

HELEN
Have you ever had a dream where you're terrified, but you can't tell exactly what

you're terrified of? Maybe it's a dark room, or a flight of stairs ... or some curtains that are fluttering just a bit.

Brady jerks a little at the word "curtains," but Helen doesn't notice--she's starting to space out a bit, caught in the spell of her description.

HELEN
Nothing especially disturbing in itself, but still you feel that fear of something infinitely terrible. And the last thing you want to know is what that something is. The knowing would be the worst part. And it gets so bad that that you have to wake yourself up before you're ripped apart by your own terror.

She comes back from her spell and looks at Brady.

HELEN
Have you ever had a dream like that? Because, lately, I have. And the sound in them is just like that storm.

Brady looks away.

BRADY
You're just overworked. We both are. Let's get some sleep.

CUT TO:

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM - LATER

The two agents are asleep, Helen in her bed, Brady in a chair. They are restless--having bad dreams.

DREAM SEQUENCE - Brady and Helen stand together in an elevator, not unlike the one in FBI headquarters. Their stance is awkward and oddly posed--they look as if they've been caught off-guard, then frozen in place. TREACLY ELEVATOR MUZAK is playing a familiar but unidentifiable tune.

MOTEL ROOM - CU ON BRADY

He is twitching slightly.

DREAM

The elevator stops. The doors open a few inches. We get a glimpse of BLACKNESS on the other side--not just shadow, but a living darkness that seems to churn like a whirlpool. The muzak is drowned out by a ROARING like an approaching tornado.

MOTEL ROOM - CU ON HELEN

Her face is twisted into a look of pain.

DREAM

The doors open a little further, revealing more of the abysmal blackness. The ROARING GROWS. In the elevator, the agents are still frozen in place. A few more inches. The roar has become a HOWL.

Finally the agents move, stepping through the doors into the roaring blackness--

MOTEL ROOM

The HOWL in the dream becomes the cacophonous RINGING of the phone. Both agents wake with a start and sit bolt upright. The phone RINGS again. Brady picks it up.

BRADY
Hello?

No reply ... at first.

BRADY
Hello?

STATICKY VOICE (ON PHONE)
Hello? Brady, is that you?

Brady turns his eyes to Helen. Though nearly lost in a storm of vague BACKGROUND NOISES, the voice on the phone is clearly hers.

The voice changes slightly--still a near-perfect imitation of Helen's, but muffled, as though spoken through clenched teeth.

STATICKY VOICE (ON PHONE)
Three o'clock. Showtime.

Brady and Helen look at the motel clock: Its green luminescent hands point to three o'clock... a.m.

STATICKY VOICE (ON PHONE)
You don't want to miss it.

The voice is lost in HISSES and POPS.

CUT TO:

INT. HELEN'S MOTEL ROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Helen comes out of the bathroom after hastily throwing some clothes on. Brady, already dressed, is dialing Helen's cell phone.

HELEN
Any luck with Ricky?

BRADY
I'm trying right now.

We hear a number of RINGS ON THE PHONE, then a CLICK as the line is PICKED UP.

BRADY
Ricky?

No--the unmistakable HISS of an answering machine tape. The voice that speaks is not Ricky Smith's.

ANSWERING MACHINE (ON THE PHONE)
Hi, kids! We've all gone to the magic show! See you there!

CLICK--the machine hangs up.

BRADY
(a bit dazed)
I got his machine.

HELEN
His machine? Brady, you dialed your own cell phone--how could

you get a machine?

BRADY
I don't know.

HELEN
Are you sure you dialed the right number?

BRADY
Yes ... I mean, I think so.

HELEN
You think so?

BRADY
Would you just lay off? I don't have the number memorized, all right? I don't usually have to call myself!

Brady starts dialing again. Helen throws her head back in frustration ... then notices something near the door.

HELEN
What is that?

BRADY
(not paying attention)
What is what?

HELEN
(pointing)
That.

Brady looks. On the floor, Just inside the door, is a large manila envelope.

Helen steps cautiously toward the door. She picks up the envelope gingerly. It is labeled "FOR THE NEWLYWEDS." We can hear FAINT RINGING over the cell phone.

Helen unfastens the envelope and lets the contents slide into her hand. It's a black-and-white--

PHOTOGRAPH

--of Brady and Helen together in the Oasis Motel lobby. They look awkward, caught off-guard. It is identical to their positions in the elevator dream.

BRADY
Helen, I had this dream--

HELEN
--about an elevator.

Brady is speechless. From the cell phone in his hand we hear the CLICK of the line picking up.

ANSWERING MACHINE (ON PHONE)
Hi, kids! We've all gone to
the magic show! See you there!

EXT. OASIS MOTEL - NIGHT

Brady and Helen come out of the room and look down Main Street.

Crampton is dead but for one building--the Masonic Hall. Though still every inch a ruin from the outside, the hall is brightly lit within. We can hear strains of CALLIOPE MUSIC--that same elusively familiar tune from the elevator dream.

INT. MASONIC HALL

Brady and Helen burst through the door and stop in their tracks, stunned. The Spectacular Display of Illusion and Ventriloquism has begun.

The inside of the hall is completely restored ... no, not restored--new, as it must have looked sixty years ago. Intricate ceiling work, warm gas-fed lamps, tapestries depicting ancient figures--perhaps the original Freemasons.

It is a full house, standing room only. The audience is a collection of ultra-glamorous and artificial-looking men and women--a grotesque version of an Academy Awards or Broadway opening night crowd. Grinning clowns work the crowd, juggling and performing petty sleight-of-hand tricks. The CALLIOPE MUSIC is playing that same tune, over and over and just a little too loud.

BRADY
What the fuck?

ON STAGE - a VENTRILOQUIST is performing. On his knee is the dummy from Illusions of Empire--Laffo.

VENTRILOQUIST
So, Laffo, why do they call you Laffo, anyway?

LAFFO
(in a hillbilly dialect)
A-cuz I'm so funny, I'll make
ya Laff yer head off! A-HAW
HAW HAW HAW HAW!

Laffo's head starts to SPIN AROUND as he LAUGHS. The LAUGHING becomes an INSANE CACKLING. Suddenly the dummy's head POPS OFF and lands on the floor ... but KEEPS LAUGHING, the mouth still moving in time.

BRADY
What is this?

HELEN
The center ring of the circus.

BRADY
So none of this is real?

HELEN
I don't think that matters
anymore.

For a second they're both stunned into silence. Then a look of determination crosses Brady's face.

BRADY
Okay, Helen, let's split up
and get a better look at
things.

HELEN
What?

BRADY

The weirder things get, the more important it is to go back to the basics, treat it like any other situation, remember?

HELEN
Are you not seeing what I'm seeing? This isn't like any other situation, Brady!

BRADY
I know, but it's the only way we're going to get through this. You take that side, I'll take this side. We'll meet up front, by the stage. Got it?

Helen Just looks dazed.

BRADY
Helen! Have you got that?

HELEN
Got it.

They each draw their sidearms and start moving through the crowd in opposite directions. The audience members don't seem to notice them at all.

ON STAGE - the ventriloquist is standing and waving to the audience, Laffo's head CACKLING AWAY in his other hand. The ventriloquist ducks through the curtain. The CALLIOPE MUSIC ENDS WITH A FLOURISH. An unseen EMCEE'S VOICE fills the room.

EMCEE

(O.S.)
And now, ladies and gentlemen,
the moment you've all been
waiting for, the centerpiece
of our display: The
Metamorphosis!

There is the sound of APPLAUSE, though nobody in the audience is actually clapping. Treacly MUZAK, cranked to distorting, is pumped into the hall.

The freckle-faced kid from the Fix-It shop pushes a wheeled platform onto the stage. On it, a LARGE-BODIED FIGURE is tied spreadeagle to a modified wheel of fortune, dressed from head to toe in a skeleton suit. An X is taped across its mouth. The kid dashes off stage.

IN THE CROWD - Brady and Helen are now on opposite sides of the room, separated by the sea of people. Brady waves to get Helen's attention.

BRADY
(shouting)
Helen! Helen!

HELEN
(shouting)
What?

BRADY
On stage! I think that's
Ricky!

Helen looks. Indeed, the figure in the skeleton suit could be Ricky. Whoever he is, he's

struggling against the bonds that hold him to the wheel ... but that could all be part of the act.

HELEN
I can't tell!

BRADY
Closer! Get closer!

Brady and Helen try to move toward the stage but it's slow going--the crowd seems to get thicker the closer they get to the stage.

ON STAGE - a tuxedoed MAGICIAN with blond hair and handsome yet forgettable features steps through the curtain. A white-tipped cane materializes in his hand. The magician uses the end of his cane to start the wheel spinning.

After a few spins the magician grabs the wheel, bringing it to a dead stop. With a flourish he tears the X off the skeleton's mouth. The bound man emits a TORMENTED SCREAM.

IN THE CROWD - Brady and Helen react, shoving people aside in an attempt to reach the stage. But for every person they push aside two fill in the gap.

HELEN
FBI!

BRADY
Federal agents! Get out of the way!

Their shouts have no effect--they don't even get the audience's attention. The agents can see the action on stage in glimpses from between shifting bodies...

ON STAGE - the magician starts the wheel spinning again. The pitch of the skeleton's SCREAMING seems to rise and fall as the wheel goes around.

With one swift movement the magician reaches toward the spinning figure, grasps the skeleton suit near the right shoulder, and peels the right sleeve away. There is nothing but empty air beneath. The SCREAM RISES. The crowd OOHS.

The magician repeats the maneuver three more times, peeling away the skeleton's left arm and legs. The SCREAMING turns into a HYSTERICAL SOBBING.

The magician stops the wheel. All that is left of the skeleton is a limbless torso and a head. With a final flourish the magician peels away the remaining costume. The figure disappears except for a NAKED SKULL, white and gleaming, which drops out of the space where the mask had been, landing in the magician's waiting hand.

The SCREAMING continues for a few moments before fading away. SILENCE ... then the ROAR of the jubilant crowd.

The music goes TA-DA! The crowd begins to break up, allowing Brady and Helen to finally move forward. Through the bodies they see the magician take his bows. A curtain rushes in from either

side of the stage, closing in front of the magician.

INT. MASONIC HALL - ON THE STAGE

The HOUSE LIGHTS GO DIM as the agents climb onto the stage. They look at the stained and tattered curtain--the same curtain from their shared dreams. Using the barrel of his gun, Brady parts the curtain slightly. A ROARING SOUND, like an approaching tornado, emanates from behind it.

HELEN
What is it?

BRADY
End of the line. Whatever is behind all this is in there.

HELEN
I'm not sure I can do this.

BRADY
Do you want to keep having that dream the rest of your life? (Beat) I know I don't.

Helen closes her eyes. She's silent for a moment. Then she opens them, a look of grim determination on her face.

HELEN
Right.

She steps into the roaring darkness. Brady is only a half-step behind. In a second they're gone--swallowed up.

CUT TO:

SWIRLING DARKNESS

Vague impressions of whirling currents. Subtle layers of darkness, like a storm of chaos. The ROARING is amazing--like a combination of a hurricane and some wild animal.

Just as the ROARING reaches its apex, the blackness splits down the middle--

CUT TO:

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - HALLWAY

Elevator doors slide open. Brady steps out, gun in hand. We hear a SINGLE GUNSHOT from OFFSCREEN.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - OFFICES

Brady rushes in through the door, gun drawn. The room is in utter chaos--FBI agents surround Larry Johnson's desk. One of them is kneeling over a figure on the floor.

BRADY
What happened?

FBI AGENT #1
He's dead.

The circle of agents breaks up. Larry Johnson is lying on the floor, his gun in his right hand. Half his head is blown off.

HELEN
Jesus Christ.

FBI AGENT #2
He just started freaking out--
screaming like a wounded
animal. Before I could do
anything he had drawn his gun.

BRADY
This isn't right. There's
supposed to be--

HELEN
--another man.

Brady turns around. Helen's eyes are fixed on his. They stars at each other like they're each trying to remember something ... something elusive.

The CAMERA PANS toward Larry's left hand. On the floor, spread out like a fan of playing cards, is a sheaf of identical black-and-white photographs. Each one depicts a tattered and stained curtain, CLOSING ... CLOSING.

JOHNSON'S FOV - looking up through a FISH EYE LENS we see one of the agents reach over to gently close Larry Johnson's eyes. The SCREEN GOES BLACK.

EXT. FBI HEADQUARTERS - EVENING

Brady comes out of the main entrance, looking exhausted. He descends the stairs to the sidewalk.

HELEN (O.S.)
Excuse me.

Brady looks over. Helen is standing nearby, leaning against a light pole. She still looks a

little confused.

HELEN
That agent, the one who ...
did you know him?

BRADY
A little. (Beat) Not really,
no.

HELEN
Oh. You just looked a little
shaken up.

BRADY
Yeah, I guess I am.

They are quiet for a few seconds, alone with their thoughts.

HELEN
Listen, I'm not sure what that
was all about ... what we said
in there, about another man--

BRADY
Forget it. I already have.

HELEN
Okay, then.

She starts to walk away. Brady watches her silently, a decision forming in his head.

BRADY
Wait a second.

She stops, turns around, waiting.

BRADY
What was your name again?

HELEN
Sweeten.
(she points to the stick-on nametag on her jacket)
Helen Sweeten.

BRADY
Helen ... have you ever seen Titanic?

Brady catches up with Helen, and they walk down the street together.

RICKY (V.O.)
They can do anything They want. They can change the entire landscape of things-- make things happen that couldn't possibly happen.

The CAMERA PANS to show the backside of the light pole that Helen had been leaning against. Someone has taped a colored flyer to it: a magician's grinning face; printed above it, "SPECTACULAR DISPLAY OF ILLUSION AND VENTRILOQUISM".

RICKY (V.O.)
Nothing is real--nothing but Them.

FADE TO BLACK.

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